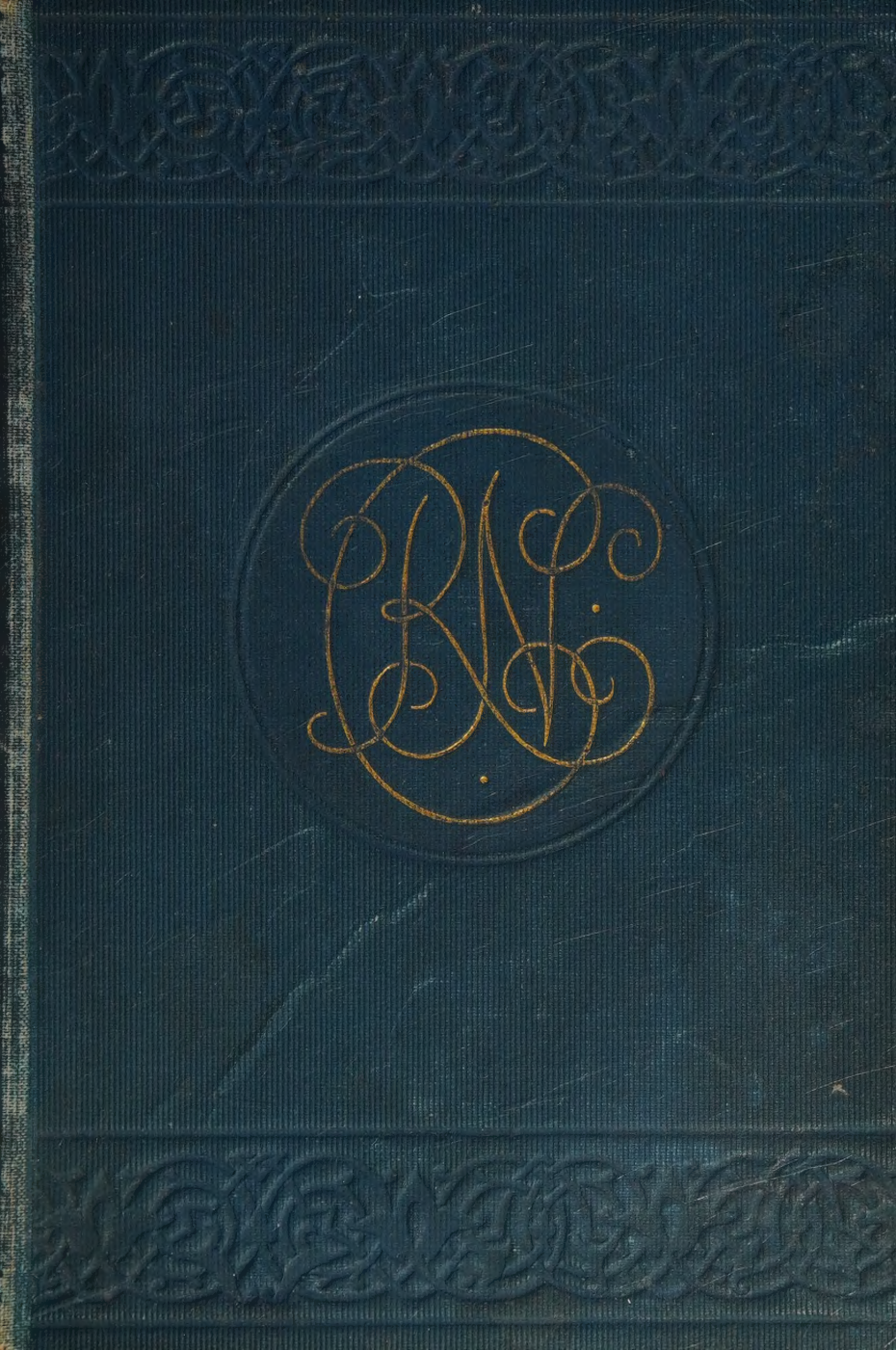

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SIR GODFREY'S GRAND-DAUGHTERS

A Novel

BY

ROSA NOUCHETTE CAREY

AUTHOR OF

'NELLIE'S MEMORIES,' 'LOVER OR FRIEND,' 'NOT LIKE OTHER GIRLS,' ETC.

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SIR GODFREY'S GRAND-DAUGHTERS

CHAPTER I

DR. LYALL DISLIKES HIS SITUATION

'Vessels large may venture more,
But little boats should keep near shore.'

BENJAMIN FRANKLIN.

'MY good sir, I must protest——'

'My dear sir, not a word! I will take no refusal; I will give no countenance to such a suicidal plan. Where are my people? Here!—Rogers, Stephens, one of you fellows—run up to the Hall, tell Mrs. Meredith that the bachelor's room is to be got ready for this gentleman: fire, hot water—she will understand. Look sharp! Don't stand there staring at me; off with you!—Now, my dear sir, take my arm and walk as fast as you can. Mind! the ground is slippery. I dare not take you by the short-cut; we should both come to grief. To be sure'—in answer to a mute response, very significant in its meaning—'I forgot your wet clothes. Shall I lead the way? We have only half a mile before us.'

What a ridiculous position! It was impossible to get in a word with this garrulous old gentleman. He was evidently master of the situation; he had turned a deaf ear to every remonstrance. Here was he, Dr. Lyall, delivered up, a shivering, unwilling captive, into the hands of this arbitrary stranger. What would Pamela say if she could see him now—his clothes dripping with water, his teeth chattering, dragging himself over the frozen ground at the heels of this

nimble-footed and straight-backed old gentleman? Never before had he found himself in such an absurd predicament; and if there was anything that Dr. Lyall detested from the bottom of his heart, it was fuss, bustle, or commotion of any kind. He was a quiet man, self-restrained, and with a sense of humour; and though he was thankful enough for his escape, for he had been in a perilous position ten minutes before, and still more thankful that he had been of use to a human being, he could not help thinking of Pamela's amused countenance when she should hear all the ridiculous details.

Well, it had been touch and go at one moment—he hardly thought he could have lasted another minute, the girl was so terribly heavy. By-the-bye, he hoped she had reached the house by this time; her sister—he supposed it was her sister; how was he to know?—seemed to have a sensible head on her shoulders. Anyhow, he had done his duty. He had managed to gasp out his directions pretty plainly: 'Make her walk if she can; anyhow, get her to some house. She must have her things off at once, and go into a warmed bed; give her some brandy—I am a doctor—ah, there's a carriage!—all the better, she will be the sooner at home—rub well with warm towels, a hot bath if her limbs ache—don't let her stand a moment.' How had he contrived to make himself audible? But he had certainly heard, 'Thank you, oh, thank you so much; I quite understand,' in a clear young voice that sounded very near him.

But his host was speaking; worse than that, he was waiting for him. The path had widened; two men could walk abreast now.

'I hope you do not feel very much chilled,' in an anxious voice; 'there was so little brandy in that flask, hardly a mouthful—they gave some to Gerda. Do you think the shock will harm her?'—anxiety evidently on the increase. 'My grand-daughter has a very sensitive organization, but she was not so very long in the water, was she? Good heavens! what should we have done if you had not gone so quickly to her rescue? Providence must have brought you here—I think seriously on these subjects; I believe in a special Providence. We are deeply indebted to you for your presence of mind and your courage, we are indeed, and I am sure my daughter will endorse this. There is the Hall.

We shall soon be up this hill; you walk stiffly, my dear sir, but of course your clothes are heavy.'

A grim smile crossed Dr. Lyall's face. In spite of his discomfort he could still realize the humour of the situation.

'That is the Hall, I suppose?' eyeing some tall chimneys dubiously.

'Yes, Chesterton Hall. Of course, if you are Captain Hake's friend, you will have heard my name,' drawing himself up a little proudly. 'We consider ourselves near neighbours.'

'I am afraid,' in an embarrassed voice, 'that I have not that pleasure. This is my first visit down here. Hake only came back from India two years ago, and I have never been able to accept his invitation before now. His wife was an old school-friend of my sister's.'

'Indeed!—a nice chatty woman; my grand-daughters are very fond of her—humph!' with rather a dignified air: 'you must allow me to introduce myself—Sir Godfrey Hamlyn, at your service.'

'My name is Lyall—Dr. Lyall,' returned the younger man quietly, as he stole a glance at his companion.

What an aristocratic old fellow he was! No doubt in his youth he had been handsome: his features were fine and his complexion had the tint of old ivory; he was well preserved, too, in spite of the lines that were plainly visible; and any young man might envy his upright carriage. If only he could be silent a moment; but he was as fluent of tongue as a woman. What a blessing! there was the house at last—a gray weather-beaten-looking place, standing just outside the park gates, with rather an unpretending entrance; but somehow he liked the look of it, though he devoutly hoped that he would not have to encounter any more of the family. Of course there would be the servants about; there was the butler on the steps, evidently on the look-out for them. Sir Godfrey hailed him at once:

'Is the bachelor's room all ready, Dalton?'

'Perfectly ready, Sir Godfrey.'

'All right; show Dr. Lyall to his room at once—stop, I will take him myself: is Mr. Gerard in? No; well, let me know directly he arrives. Now then, my dear sir, this way'—disregarding his guest's remonstrance, 'Dalton,' still talking

fast, 'send Rogers at once to Braeside for Dr. Lyall's Gladstone; his things have gone on there. Tell Captain Hake, with my compliments—my compliments, Dalton—that I am detaining his guest; let Rogers inform him of the accident—he was there and saw it all; there is no time to write a note.'

'My dear sir,' interposed Dr. Lyall, with just a trace of irritation in his quiet tone, 'please allow me to send a message. Tell Captain Hake,' addressing the man in rather a curt, authoritative voice, 'that I am only in need of some dry clothes; that I have taken no harm, and shall certainly be at his dinner-table this evening. That is all that need be said,' as Sir Godfrey shook his head. 'You are very good, Sir Godfrey, and these are comfortable quarters,' looking round the luxuriously-furnished room, and then at the fireplace, where some dry pine-logs were spluttering and blazing; 'but I do not mean to trespass on your hospitality for more than a few hours.'

'There was a little more argument, a few pressing inquiries as to his physical feelings, some well-meaning advice, and then Sir Godfrey went in search of his daughter. He had not forgotten the other sufferer, who was his own flesh and blood; but the Hamlyns were hospitable people, and *noblesse oblige:* the stranger who had rescued his grand-daughter, who had risked his own life—Sir Godfrey liked to put things in their strongest light—had undoubtedly the first claim on him. Sir Godfrey, with his old-fashioned courtesy, his punctilious, chivalrous notions, would have willingly served him with his own hands if Dr. Lyall would have permitted it. It cost Dr. Lyall some trouble to get rid of him and Dalton. As soon as he was alone, he locked the door and drew a long breath of relief, and then set himself seriously to better his condition.

A few minutes later he sat by the fireside, warmly wrapped up in a quilted dressing-gown belonging to his host, sipping a stiff glass of brandy and water. A hot bath had refreshed him; he had an eider-down over his knees, never in his life had he felt more comfortable, and, blessing of blessings, he was alone: not even Sir Godfrey would force his way through a locked door—why, he had even drawn the bolt between him and the outer world.

So this was the bachelor's room—bachelors were in clover at Chesterton Hall; but how did Sir Godfrey guess that he was an unmarried man? He looked old enough and staid

enough for a Benedict; but a truce to this nonsense! he must set himself to review the whole situation. How many hours was it since he had left Pamela, and had nodded and waved to her? Hours—tut! it was barely an hour and a half, and yet all this had happened. She had merely nodded in an off-hand way as she settled herself against the cushions of the carriage, he believed she had not even looked at him; and yet at one moment—one confoundedly unpleasant moment—he thought he should never see her again.

Sir Godfrey believed in a special Providence, did he? Good old man! on the whole he shared his opinions; but he was an Englishman, and preferred to keep all such opinions to himself.

Now for it—he must go over the whole thing point by point before he got sleepy; but the fire was warm and the brandy was potent. He wondered if the young lady were asleep by this time.

Well, after all, it was a droll idea of his to stop the carriage and insist on walking the remainder of the way. It was a good two miles to Braeside, the coachman told him, but he was cold and wanted to stretch his legs, and Pamela could take care of herself and the luggage.

She did not really mind, though she grumbled, and told him he would get cold tea, and most likely lose his way; but she was accustomed to be overruled by his masculine will, and she would only revenge herself by a little quiet satire at his expense afterwards.

He had enjoyed his walk very much, and he fancied he was near his destination, when, by either good or ill luck, he saw some boys with skates slung over their shoulders, and on questioning them found out that they were going to skate on the lake in Chesterton Park.

'Anyone goes who likes,' one of the boys informed him. 'There is rare good ice, and the Squire takes no end of trouble about it. People come from miles round, and it is quite lively sometimes;' and then they had wished him good-afternoon and had gone on their way.

He could not imagine what put it into his head to follow them; he was excessively fond of skating, and as a holiday was a rare thing in his hard-working life, he determined to make the most of it; perhaps Hake would be there himself,

and gentlemen were not wanted at afternoon tea—it was the women's hour. Perhaps it was as well for the young lady that he had yielded to the temptation. He felt rather like a truant school-boy as he turned in at the park-gates; he scarcely noticed the gray old Hall as he passed it. The lads were before him, racing each other down the ice-bound path, and he had rather a difficulty to keep them in sight. Presently he caught a blue gleam through the trees, and, walking more slowly, he presently found himself at the edge of a little lake, which seemed to wind very prettily between thickly-wooded banks.

There were a great many skaters, and he stood still to watch them. Some of the ladies skated very gracefully. There were two rather tall girls among them; as they were dressed alike—in dark tweed dresses—he thought possibly they might be sisters.

One of them skimmed over the ice with a quiet grace that somewhat fascinated him—she was a pale, delicate-looking girl, with fair hair, that looked very nice under her close little velvet hat. The other girl skated very well too, but her movements were not so uniformly graceful. Somehow, he singled out these two girls, and watched them, half idly, half admiringly, after the manner of masculine loungers. There was nothing very remarkable about either of them; he he had seen far prettier girls any day in London. The younger one had a round, innocent-looking face, and her hair looked rough and curly, as though the exercise had dishevelled it; and once or twice, as she shot past him, she looked at him with childlike curiosity, as though marvelling at the presence of a stranger. He thought the other sister had not noticed him at all, she was so intent on her amusement.

It was a raw wintry afternoon, and standing made him feel chilly. How he wished he had his skates with him! it was almost too tantalizing to watch other people enjoying his favourite pastime. To keep himself warm he walked briskly to the other end of the lake, where a couple of swans were pluming themselves discontentedly outside their little wooden house. The snow had not been so carefully cleared here, and it was evident that this part of the lake was not used by the skaters; to his practised eye the ice looked somewhat thin and unsafe.

'They ought to warn people not to come farther than that island,' he said to himself; 'to my mind, there is a treacherous look about the ice here. I don't believe it would bear my weight. What fools people are, not to take precautions! The Squire, whoever he is, is responsible for the safety of his guests. I have almost a mind to speak to someone. Hollo! by Jove! here comes one of those girls. I must warn her.'

Well, he had warned her—at least, he had tried to do so—but she had evidently not heard him. She was making the circuit of the lake. She swept round the farther bank, and then steered her course straight towards the point where he was standing.

'Don't come any farther; the ice will not bear!' he had shouted, and then she had stopped and looked at him in a half-hesitating way.

'It was quite safe yesterday,' she had returned. But before the words were out of her mouth there was a crash—a fissure—and then a terrified scream as the poor girl felt the deadly cold of the water closing round her.

'Save me! save me!' he heard her gasp, as her agonized hands tried to grip the breaking ice.

'Keep still; I will do all I can,' he had shouted. How had he managed to reach her? His memory failed to help him here. He fancied he had crawled on his hands and knees over the few feet of ice that lay between her and the bank. It was a terribly risky thing to do. The next moment he was in the water too, and was holding her up, and imploring her not to struggle. He was only just in time; he was sure of that. Another moment, and she would have been sucked under the ice. She was only half conscious too, and her weight nearly broke his arm.

He was pretty sure, in thinking it over, that the ground shelved just there. For one moment he had lost his footing, and seemed out of his depth. The next his head and shoulders were out of the water, and the girl's head was above water too; but it was all so confused, so sudden, so horribly unreal, that even now he hardly knew how it had all happened. Every moment the ice seemed breaking round him, the water grew more deadly cold, and his arm became more numbed. 'Good God!' he had said to himself, I can-

not hold her a moment longer.' But even as the thought crossed him help had come.

His sharp cry for assistance had been heard. Men were running down the bank. A plank was held out to him. Thank Heaven! he had still strength to grasp it. Another moment, and they were both in safety, and a rough-looking man in the dress of a gamekeeper was holding a flask to his mouth.

'Take a good pull, sir. We have given the young lady some.'

And then he had found strength to gasp out his directions. He would have gone to her at once. Being a doctor, he felt bound to do so. But for the moment he was too numb to move, and he was reassured by seeing her pass him, supported by a gentleman, and wrapped in a fur-lined cloak. They were helping her into a carriage, and the girl he took for her sister followed her.

'The brandy has brought her round,' an old gentleman had assured him. 'Jamieson had his flask, luckily. Now, my dear sir, we must think of you.' And then had followed the brief argument, which had ended in victory on Sir Godfrey's side.

'Life is a curious thing,' he went on drowsily, as he ended this retrospect with a shiver. 'One never knows what comes in the day's work. When I packed up my Gladstone this morning to the tune of "Come, lasses and lads," it never entered my mind that I was to be half drowned before night. Faugh! it was an unpleasant situation;' and, in spite of his philosophy and his present comfort, Dr. Lyall gave a genuine shudder as he recalled the dead weight of the half-conscious girl, and how the icy cold of the water had seemed to deprive him of breath. 'It is a nasty feeling—that of a rat in a hole,' he thought. 'If one could strike out and swim, one would not mind a plunge in winter time. I have often heard of ice accidents, but I never realized them before. I wonder what Pamela thinks of my adventure. Of course, she will have her fun out of it—trust her for that!'

Here Dr. Lyall's thoughts became confused, and a few moments later he was fast asleep.

CHAPTER II

FIVE MINUTES LATE BY GRANDFATHER'S CLOCK

'Even his own tail is a burden to the weary fox.'—
Proverb of Montenegro.

A BRISK knock at the door, then another, still louder and more imperative. Dr. Lyall sat up and rubbed his eyes in rather a bewildered fashion. Had he been asleep? The room was nearly dark. A great red hollow had replaced the blaze. Dr. Lyall looked at it drowsily. Then he said:

'Come in.'

'I am afraid I must trouble you to unlock the door,' returned a cheerful voice which certainly did not belong to his host.

'Oh, I quite forgot the bolt,' with an apologetic laugh. 'I believe I have been asleep.'

'Upon my word, I believe so, too; and not being a disembodied spirit, I have not learnt the vanishing trick yet.'

This was decidedly frivolous. Sir Godfrey would certainly not express himself in this way. As he grappled rather clumsily with the lock, he wondered who the newcomer would be. The next moment a tall, broad-shouldered young man walked into the room with a Gladstone bag in his hand.

He was a good-looking fellow, with a brown moustache, and, as they shook hands, he regarded Dr. Lyall with an air of extreme amusement.

'I hope you will excuse my costume,' observed the latter, nervously aware of this good-natured scrutiny.

'Well, do you know, I rather like it—looks Oriental and imposing. I believe I recognise that shawl pattern. How do you find yourself after your nap? Pretty fit? No bad symptoms? That's right! Well, I have brought you your things, and there's a note somewhere'—fumbling in his breast-pocket; 'let me light those candles—we can scarcely see each other—and I may as well throw on another log. Here is your note, and the ladies want to know if you will have some tea.'

'No, thanks. I have been indulging in something stronger. I am sorry you should have troubled yourself with that heavy bag.'

'No trouble at all. Besides, Rogers carried it, only he could not make you hear—you were sound asleep. I was afraid something had happened, and we should have to burst the door open. I was sorry I was not in time to be of any service; that is just my luck! I never am in time for anything. Never mind! I am delighted to find you are no worse for your cold bath, and of course'—with a slight change of tone—'we are all awfully obliged to you, and all that sort of thing, for rescuing my cousin.'

'Your cousin!' in some perplexity.

'Well, Miss Meredith is a sort of cousin; did you think she was my sister? By-the-bye, I have not introduced myself. My name is Hamlyn, and Hake is one of my chums. That reminds me that we are to dine with him presently, and it is half-past six now. What do you propose to do, Dr. Lyall? My uncle has entreated me almost with tears in his eyes to use all my powers of persuasion to keep you here to-night, and let me be the bearer of your excuses. It is an awful bore putting on one's war-paint and making one's self agreeable when one has just had a ducking, and you are tolerably snug here, eh?'

'I agree with every word you say, Mr. Hamlyn, especially with the last clause; but please make Sir Godfrey understand that I am bound to fulfil my engagement. Thanks to my hot bath and glass of stiff grog, I believe I shall escape even a cold.'

'All right; we will drive you over, then. Shall I send up someone to unpack for you?'

'Thanks awfully, but I am accustomed to be my own valet.

I shall not be long over my toilet. By-the-bye, Mr. Hamlyn, I have not asked after your cousin yet. I trust she is feeling no ill effects from her accident?'

'Oh dear no; she is as fit as possible. She is actually insisting on going to the dinner-party; her mother is nearly in tears over her perversity, and my uncle is storming up and down the hall like an old lion; but they may as well spare their breath,' continued the young man dryly. 'My cousin has a will of her own.'

'Do you think it would be any use my sending a message?' asked Dr. Lyall. Such imprudence vexed his professional soul. 'I am a medical man, and I am quite sure that, after such a shock, she ought to keep perfectly quiet. Will you tell her so from me?'

'Yes, certainly; but I am afraid she will go, all the same. Now I will leave you in peace. *Au revoir!*' And as he closed the door, Dr. Lyall could hear him whistling along the passage.

'A pleasant, gentlemanly fellow,' was Dr. Lyall's inward comment as he unstrapped his Gladstone. Then a slight frown contracted his forehead. 'Is that girl mad?' he said to himself. 'There is no foolishness of which a woman is not capable. I suppose she means to put on a thin dress. Perhaps,' still more disgustedly, 'a low dress. If I were her mother I would lock her up in her room. Pamela can be unreasonable sometimes, but even she would not act in this crazy fashion. By the way, where is Pamela's note? I forgot all about it. Of course, it is in pencil, and nearly illegible.'

'DEAR ALICK,—So sorry for your accident! How on earth did you get to the lake in Chesterton Park? This is a mystery. Did you lose your way, after all? What a goose you were to get out of the carriage!

'I have sent your things. Do pray put in an appearance as soon as possible, or we shall think you are half drowned. The Hakes are in such a fuss, for fear their dinner-table should be put out. So come if you possibly can, and I will promise to nurse you, and not laugh at you more than you deserve.—Your affectionate sister, PAM.'

'I have almost a mind not to go after all,' growled Dr. Lyall, seizing his hair-brushes rather fiercely. 'Put out their dinner-table indeed! Rubbish! A nice sisterly letter, upon my word! and a capital nurse she would make, too. I always told her that if I were ill she should not cross the threshold of my room. A sick man does not want a bit of quicksilver dancing attendance on him. Pam is too jerky, too original altogether, to make a comfortable nurse. If she had been in that ice-hole we should both have been drowned to a dead certainty, as sure as my name is Alexander Lyall; she could not keep still to save her life. I pity Vincent—I do from my heart. He will never tackle her properly. How can any sensible fellow tackle an anomaly?' And with these fraternal reflections Dr. Lyall continued his toilet.

He cast a look of regret round the room as he prepared to quit it. What a shame to leave that splendid fire! He would rather have liked to have occupied that comfortable-looking bed for one night. That young fellow was right; it was an awful bore turning out this cold evening, with only the prospect of having to make himself agreeable to some stranger for two hours. As a rule, he rather liked dinner-parties, but he was lazy, and not disposed to exert himself. He consoled himself, however, with the thought that he would not have to endure the monopoly of Sir Godfrey's conversation. Besides, Hake was a capital fellow, and his wife one of the nicest women possible. Why, once upon a time, he had been rather smitten with her, before Hake carried her off. If only people would hold their tongues about the unlucky accident; but, alas! it would be public property by this time.

He had not a notion where to go, but he intended to make his way to the hall. Perhaps he might find some servant there to direct him.

As he walked down the corridor he was sure he heard voices. They seemed to proceed from below. As he prepared to descend the staircase, he looked cautiously over the carved balustrades, and an unexpected sight met his eyes. The whole family seemed gathered round the hall fire. He had never seen anything more picturesque: it reminded him of a scene in a play. It was a large square hall, heavily wainscoted in oak, with two handsomely-carved screens, one

of which shut out the draught of the front-door, and the other hid the staircase.

Even in that subdued light he could see that the walls were covered with trophies and weapons of every description —splendidly mounted guns and pistols, suits of rusty armour, and a bristling array of javelins, battle-axes, halberds, and daggers, while antique cabinets, full of archæological treasures, occupied the corners. An oak settle and some heavily-carved chairs were arranged in a semicircle round the fire, while tables littered with every description of feminine and masculine employment gave an air of comfort to the whole scene. He would willingly have looked a little longer, but it was impossible to remain there unperceived. He must summon up courage to join the family circle.

'Here is our guest, my dear,' he heard Sir Godfrey say, as he stepped from behind the screen. 'How do you find yourself, my dear sir?'—shaking him vigorously by the hand. 'Honoria, this is Dr. Lyall—my daughter, Mrs. Meredith;' and a pale lady-like woman rose at once with smile and outstretched hand.

'I have been longing to thank you,' she said in a pleasant voice that was very agreeable to his ear. Dr. Lyall always liked women to have soft voices. 'I have been too much engrossed with my poor child to see after your comfort myself, but I trust you had everything you wanted. It was such a terrible shock to us when Mr. Brown brought her home in his carriage! I cannot bear to think of what would have happened but for you. Doris, you must help me thank Dr. Lyall;' and then a tall young lady, with light curly hair came up to him, whom he at once recognised as the younger sister.

'I wish we knew how to thank you properly,' she said, with frank eagerness, and there was no trace of shyness in her manner, only a gentle friendliness that took him by surprise. 'I saw it all, Dr. Lyall; I heard Gerda scream, and saw her fall,' with a shudder, 'and then you went to her and I rushed away to get help. Ah, how brave you were! No,' as Dr. Lyall muttered something in reply to this, 'of course you do not like to be thanked; but it is such a relief to us—is it not, mother?—and Gerard told me I must say something pretty.'

If he only knew how to answer this girlish outburst—if he were not such an utter fool! He could talk fluently enough on most occasions, he had strong opinions on most subjects, and had never found much difficulty in airing his views; but he was a modest man, and disliked to hear his own praises even from his patients' lips. If he had been alone with this young lady, if her blue eyes had only confronted him, he could have acquitted himself very tolerably; but there were Sir Godfrey and Mr. Hamlyn in the background, and to his relief Mr. Hamlyn came promptly to his rescue.

'Dr. Lyall quite understands, so you may as well let him warm himself before the carriage comes round; don't move, Uncle Godfrey, I will give him my corner.—By the way, Doris, you had better tell Gerda to hurry up, or we shall be late.'

A quick look of alarm crossed Sir Godfrey's countenance: its urbane expression changed to one of intense anxiety; if a bomb had suddenly exploded in the midst of the circle, he could not have seemed more visibly discomposed.

'Dear, dear, Gerard, I hope you are wrong,' he said rather nervously. Late? I have never been late at a dinner-party in my life. Doris,' in a quick, imperative voice, 'tell your sister from me, that if she has made up her mind to commit suicide—suicide; yes, that is the correct word—she has no right to add to her sin unpunctuality; that I shall be excessively displeased—excessively——Why, the child has gone without allowing me to finish my sentence!'

'There are two sins that my uncle regards as unpardonable,' observed Mr. Hamlyn in an airy manner: 'unpunctuality, and killing foxes.'

'You may add a third,' returned Sir Godfrey sharply: 'want of reverence—want of reverence, Gerard. We live in sad times, Dr. Lyall; young folk nowadays know better than their elders. I was differently brought up; we were taught consideration and courtesy—consideration and courtesy. Why, when I was a young man I would as soon have thought of knocking my father down as of keeping him waiting; he was short in his temper, and would not have stood it for a moment. Of course you laugh, Gerard—you laugh at everything; all the same, I must trouble you to ring that bell.—Dalton,' as the butler entered, 'order the carriage round at

once—at once.—If Gerda be not ready,' addressing his daughter, 'I regret to say we must go without her; we owe it to Dr. Lyall not to keep him any longer from his friends.'

What had come to his suave, hospitable host? There was a shade on Sir Godfrey's brow; his bland loquacity was replaced by sharp, querulous tones: could a delay of a few minutes have ruffled his equanimity so seriously, or had Mr. Hamlyn's flippant remarks given offence? He stole a glance at him. Mr. Hamlyn was arranging the flower in his button-hole, and seemed perfectly at his ease—he even hummed something under his breath.

If Dr. Lyall had known the Hamlyn temperament, he would not have troubled himself at Sir Godfrey's quick change of mood.

The Squire's temper was by no means perfect. He had many virtues; he was truthful, kind-hearted, and made an excellent landlord. When he loved, he attached himself strongly; but he was an autocrat by nature, and somewhat narrow-minded and obstinate, and he was given to be arbitrary even in trifles. As he said himself, every man ought to be master in his own house.

Once upon a time, when Gerard Hamlyn's curly head was brimful of boyish mischief, a roughly scrawled sheet was found posted over the barometer in the hall one morning, headed:

'My Uncle's Barometer.

'The following forecast for to-day was prepared at the Meteorological Office:

10 A.M. South-westerly winds; undulating; fair as a whole.
12 P.M. Wind decidedly in the east, becoming less mild.
2 P.M. Colder; changeable.
4 P.M. A moderate gale, strong and fresh.
6 P.M. Temperature tolerably even.
8 P.M. Look out for squalls.'

Happily, this remarkable specimen of boyish wit was promptly removed by Dalton; but it was remarked by Sir Godfrey more than once that day that the servants seemed unusually merry.

Carriage-wheels were distinctly audible, and at the same moment the younger Miss Meredith came quickly round the screen, followed by a pale, slim girl in white, who regarded

Dr. Lyall with singular earnestness as she passed him, and then stopped and, half hesitatingly, put out her hand.

'I'm afraid this is hardly prudent,' he began; but she turned quickly away with a faint smile, and beckoned the maid to bring her her wraps.

'Do you know you have actually kept us five minutes waiting, Gerda?' gasped Sir Godfrey. He was just getting into his great-coat, and the exertion made him a little breathless.—'Gerard, put your cousin in the carriage; Dr. Lyall and I will follow. Now, my dear sir'—with an old-fashioned bow and dignified wave of the hand; and Dr. Lyall reluctantly preceded him.

He ensconced himself silently in his corner, and watched the gleams from the carriage-lamps flashing along the snowy road. Miss Meredith was equally silent, and made no attempt to address him. He had already decided that neither of the sisters was pretty, and he was not disposed to change this opinion. Nevertheless, competent authorities had adjudged to the elder Miss Meredith a tolerable share of good looks. She was interesting, people said, and rather uncommon-looking. She had undeniably good points—a clear, pale complexion, and hair of that soft, pretty tint of fairness that in certain lights and under certain conditions looks golden.

Dr. Lyall had noticed none of these beauties, but two things had struck him—first, the grave intentness of the look with which she had regarded him; and, secondly, the simplicity of her attire, for her white neck and arms were devoid of all ornament.

Her taciturnity repelled him, and he made no attempt to draw her into conversation. Strange to say, though, as a rule, he disliked thanks, her total silence seemed to him misplaced and in bad taste.

'It is impossible to understand a woman,' he thought sarcastically. 'One would have expected a civil word, after a fellow has plunged up to the neck in cold water on her account. I suppose she considers me a bear for not asking how she is; but'—a little obstinately, for Dr. Lyall could be obstinate—'I have already prescribed for her, and sent her a message, but she has refused to follow my advice.' And then he asked Sir Godfrey how far it was to Braeside.

'We shall be there directly; we turn down the next

corner,' was the reply. 'Gerda, my dear, you are very quiet. I have not heard your voice yet. I have been waiting to hear you make some pretty speeches to Dr. Lyall. In my time, a girl would have found something to say to the man who had just saved her life—eh, Gerard?'

'You need not ask me, sir. I am green with envy; it is just like my luck—I am never in time for anything. If you are going to make a speech, Gerda, you must hurry up.'

'One cannot make speeches to order,' returned his cousin in a cold, quiet voice.

And then the carriage stopped, and the next moment a jovial voice rang through the darkness: 'Where's Lyall? What have you done with him, Sir Godfrey? Ah, there you are, my dear fellow, large as life! Let me have a look at him, Miss Meredith, and then I will take you into the drawing-room. So you have been half drowned, old man, and are none the worse for it!' And, with a friendly clap on the shoulder, Captain Hake turned to Miss Meredith; next moment there was a confusion of hand-shaking, laughter, and sympathetic speeches, as Mrs. Hake and the assembled guests crowded round Sir Godfrey and his grand-daughter.

Dr. Lyall had greeted his hostess, and had then retreated to the hearthrug, where he was followed almost immediately by a short, dark young lady, in a yellowish silk dress, who looked at him half mischievously and half affectionately.

'Alick, what an absurd boy you have been! However could you go and do it?'

'I confess I don't see the absurdity, Pamela.'

'Well,' in a teasing voice, 'I will refrain from enlightening you, for I see that you are quaking with apprehension at the ordeal that lies before you. Do you know, Gertrude means to thank you for enlivening her dinner-party—dinner-parties are so awfully slow at Chesterton: people never know what to talk about. And now you have furnished them with conversation; you should just have heard their tongues wagging before you came in! Is that pale girl the heroine? What a pity she is not prettier! I don't care for that sort of washed-out beauty; do you know, you have to take her in to dinner; it was all arranged beforehand, and Gertrude says it must be fate.'

'I wish you would shut up, Pam;' and Dr. Lyall's tone was decidedly unamiable.

'Alick,' remarked his sister severely, but there was a merry little dimple belying her tone, 'I am afraid your cold bath has not improved a temper by no means naturally sweet.'

And then, as Captain Hake came towards them, she moved lightly away; and the next moment she had the pleasure of seeing her brother standing, looking very stiff and uncomfortable, by Miss Meredith's side.

CHAPTER III

BREAKING THE ICE

'It is good to rub and polish our brain against that of others. —
MONTAIGNE

DR. LYALL inwardly owned that his sister was right. He was in an execrable temper; he was tired, cold, and Pamela had, as usual, rubbed him up the wrong way. Everything was against him. He had to take in the very girl whom he was most anxious to avoid—a haughty young woman, who would not deign to acknowledge him except by a flicker of a white eyelid as she bowed in response to her host's introduction.

'No need to introduce my old friend, Dr. Lyall—eh, Miss Meredith? I'll be bound you two know each other well enough by this time; nothing like an accident for breaking the ice. Ah! ah! I call that good—never meant it, though. Just listen, Gertie; have you ever heard a better joke?' And Captain Hake moved away with his jolly laugh, and they could hear him repeating his speech to a group of admiring auditors: 'Breaking the ice—ha! ha!'

Dr. Lyall's dark eyebrows contracted more closely. He was not a tall man, but he looked so at times when he held up his head in that way and squared his shoulders; he had a sturdy, strongly-built figure that somehow suited his face.

He was by no means a handsome man, and his best friend would hardly have called him good-looking; but he looked sensible and reliable. Perhaps his mouth was his best feature—his lips closed very firmly, and his smile was frank

and sweet: one of his patients said it always had the effect of sudden sunshine on her. But there was no smile on his face now, as he stood moodily pulling his moustache and staring over Miss Meredith's head. She was speaking to the lady next her, and had not thought it necessary to break off her conversation; she had a smooth, quiet voice, and he listened to it half absently.

'It has done me no harm, thank you; at least, I hope not. I am really strong, you know.'

'I should not have said so. Doris is the only strong one of the family. I am sure you are terribly imprudent to be here to-night.'

'I am afraid we must go in to dinner, Miss Meredith,' he had observed at this point. And then she had turned and put her hand in his arm. Was she shy? Did her silence proceed from diffidence? He hardly thought so, and as they seated themselves, and he handed her the menu with a commonplace remark on the beauty of the flowers before them, his bored look was plainly visible to his sister.

'Poor Alick! he is not enjoying himself a bit,' she thought compassionately; 'and no wonder, with that stick of a girl next him.' And then she addressed herself with renewed vivacity to the young barrister beside her. He was clever and amusing, and knew how to talk. Besides, he was a friend of a certain gentleman with whom she was on intimate terms.

'You know Derrick Vincent, I'm told,' he had said to her the moment they were introduced.

'Of course I do. I am engaged to him, as Mrs. Hake has probably told you,' was her quick reply. And then he had laughed, and had admitted the fact. And after that they had got on excellently together. No man with an ordinary amount of intelligence ever found it difficult to get on with Pamela Lyall.

A few more platitudes, which his companion answered in monosyllables, and then Dr. Lyall turned his attention to his soup. As he partook of it, he was wondering whether he might venture to recommend Miss Meredith to take a glass of wine. He had been struck by her paleness, and he was by no means convinced that she was as well as she made herself out to be. He had noticed an involuntary shiver, and again he told himself savagely that women, even the best of

them, were fools. He was just making up his mind to run the risk of a rebuff, when he was electrified by hearing her speak to him in a quick, nervous voice:

'Dr. Lyall, what must you have thought of me? I have been all this time in your company, and have never thanked you yet for coming to my help in that noble way. I am quite ashamed of myself. I must have seemed so cold, so ungrateful.' And then she broke off, and commenced plaiting her table-napkin into folds with her white fingers.

Dr. Lyall sat bolt upright and motioned away some turbot with an impatient gesture, though he was particularly partial to that fish. For the moment he was almost too surprised to answer. Then he returned abruptly but not unkindly:

'Please don't mention it; there is not the slightest occasion to trouble yourself. It is an awful bore, that sort of thing.'

This was vague, to say the least of it, and Miss Meredith looked still more disturbed.

'I am sure you are offended with me.' And her lip gave a little quiver as she spoke.

'You are wrong,' he returned warmly. 'I am not in the least offended.' A white fib that, Dr. Lyall! 'Why should you thank me? Anyone would have acted as I did under the circumstances.'

'I am not so sure of that. Some men would have hesitated, and then it would have been too late. Of course, I know that you saved my life. I felt myself sinking, and then you caught me. Oh, it was so sudden and so terrible. Do you know,' speaking still lower, as though she were afraid she would be overheard, 'I meant to thank you. I came downstairs with that purpose, but they were all there looking at me. Of course, they were waiting to hear me say it. Do you know that feeling, when people are expecting you to do something, and you are determined to disappoint them? It was very bad of me. I am afraid I shall shock you, but I am often like that.'

He could not forbear a smile, though she was speaking almost with solemnity. But his smile was a very pleasant one. He was agreeably deceived. The haughty young woman, as he had called her, was accusing herself with the artless *naïveté* of a child. He was amused—nay, more, he was interested. An ordinary girl would not have so frankly owned herself in the wrong.

'I am afraid I have shocked you,' she continued penitently. 'Of course, a man never feels like that.'

'You are wrong there, Miss Meredith. We have our tempers, too. Now you have finished your confession, I will promise you full absolution if you will drink that glass of champagne at your elbow. I am a medical man, you know, and I think you ought to respect my advice.'

'Very well, you shall be obeyed. But I cannot eat,' as he looked meaningly at her untouched plate. 'Please go on with your own dinner; I am not hungry to-night.' And then for a little while he left her to her own devices.

But he resumed the conversation presently with a zest that surprised himself. Dr. Lyall was not a lady's man—young unmarried women often complained that he was stiff and cold in his manner to them—but the fact was, that the ordinary run of girls, with their free and flippant manners, failed to please him. They were too independent and outspoken; they had little reticence, and no reserve. He was always telling Pamela so—none of them came up to his private standard. In his eyes no woman was attractive unless she combined softness and refinement of manners with her other virtues. No doubt the girls he met on his daily rounds would make excellent wives and mothers, but he could not have fallen in love with one of them. When Vincent came to him and told him that he wanted to marry Pamela he had hardly been able to disguise his surprise. Somehow, the idea that any man would want to marry Pamela had never entered his head. Well, there was no accounting for taste; he must remember that.

Miss Meredith was leaning back in her chair, with her eyes fixed thoughtfully on the lady nearly opposite her, and he stole a quick glance at her unperceived. He thought he rather admired her style, it was so uncommon. Her head was a little bent, and the crown of fair plaits shone like gold in the lamplight. When he had seen them last, they had been unloosened, and hung heavily over his arm. Unaware of this thought that was passing through his mind, she turned to him rather quickly.

'I am wondering who that lady can be—the one in yellow silk. I have never seen her before, and I know most of the Hake's friends. Do you know her name?'

'Certainly I do. She is my sister.'

'Your sister!'

'She is my younger sister, and keeps my house—at least, she thinks she does—but her views on housekeeping are somewhat limited.'

'I am afraid you are rather satirical.'

'Not at all. I leave satire to Pamela—she is an adept in it.'

'Pamela! What a droll, old-fashioned name; but somehow I rather like it.'

'You have an uncommon name yourself, have you not, Miss Meredith?'

'I suppose I have—Gerda. It is pure Saxon, my grandfather says. He wanted my sister Doris to be called Rowena, but mother rebelled. She said Rowena was such an uncomfortable name.'

'I cannot say that I admire it.'

'No, nor I; but I like Gerda. I am so glad they did not call me Maria—after Sterne's Maria, you know. I believe grandfather proposed that. I always pity people with ugly names. I think people should be allowed to re-christen themselves when they arrive at a proper age. What a dreadful idea to be a Fanny, or a Sophia, or an Emma all one's life!'

'I think you may rest satisfied with your sponsor's choice.'

'Yes, and your sister also. How strange to think you are a doctor!'

'Where does the strangeness lie, Miss Meredith? I am very proud of my profession.'

'And rightly, too. I did not mean anything disparaging. It only seemed to me a curious coincidence that your business should be saving lives. But you have never risked your life before in doing it, have you?'

'I don't believe I risked it this afternoon.' Another white fib. 'You make too much of a slight service.'

'A slight service!'—her lip curling. 'Never mind, I will keep my gratitude to myself, for I see I am boring you. Nevertheless, I shall persist in thinking that I owe my life to you.'

'What nonsense!' but he reddened a little.

For the first time in his life he did not mind hearing his

good deeds magnified. Perhaps it was her quiet voice or manner that pleased his taste.

As he gave her some grapes—they had arrived at dessert by this time, for their conversation had been interlarded with intervals of silence—he told himself, with a twinge of remorse, that he would never judge anyone so hastily again. He had been accusing her of coldness and pride; he had even told himself that she had been too high and mighty to condescend to talk to a humble doctor. How he had wronged her! She was treating him with the utmost courtesy and consideration. Her brief haughtiness had been confessed with childlike contrition; what he had taken for reserve had been a vain attempt to cloak feelings too deep for utterance. She was evidently different from other girls; she took life more gravely and earnestly. Most likely she was full of crude theories. Probably she made as many mistakes as other people, but he had never seen anyone so genuine.

'Do you live in London?' she asked him rather abruptly, but he shook his head.

'Not now, we live at Cromehurst; but that is near London, you know. I have gone in partnership with a doctor there; it seems a good opening,' rather reflectively.

'What is his name?—I know Cromehurst,' with a certain quickness that seemed natural to her.

'Dr. Brown—is he a friend of yours?' a little dubiously.

'Not a friend,' as though reproving the implied doubt; 'but I know him slightly—at least, I know his daughter Jessie.'

'Jessie Brown!' It was his turn to be surprised now.

'Yes, I have an aunt living at Cromehurst—Mrs. Glyn. Her husband—my uncle, I mean—is the Vicar of St. Jude's;' but she was checked by an exclamation from Dr. Lyall.

'I know Mrs. Glyn—Pamela has taken a great fancy to her——'

Here he was interrupted by an expressive look of the hostess round the table. He thought Miss Meredith rose a little reluctantly.

'How stupid just to break off in the most interesting part, and Aunt Clare is always so interesting to me!'

'Never mind; it shall be continued in our next,' he returned, following her to the door, and to this she had smil-

ingly assented. Dr. Lyall felt a little giddy as he went back to his seat and helped himself to filberts; perhaps it was that tumble of his—perhaps——'I beg your pardon, what did you say?' in rather a confused voice.

'All right, my dear fellow; I only asked you to pass the bottle. Capital wine, this of Hake's! Did you try the madeira? No! Good heavens! then you have lost something. —Hake, old man, I am taking your name in vain; I am warning Dr. Lyall not to taste that vile concoction you call madeira—hand it up here, and it shall be subjected to medical test.—Now then, Lyall, fill your glass, and don't think of your neighbours;' and Mr. Hamlyn watched the process with friendly and unselfish interest.

Meanwhile Miss Meredith had followed the other ladies, and had seated herself closely by the fire, trusting that the group of animated talkers gathered on the rug might leave her in peace; but the next moment someone tapped her lightly on the arm with a fan, and, looking up, she saw Mrs. Hake and the vivacious little lady in yellow regarding her with some amusement.

'Dreaming, as usual, Gerda! but you must wake up; Miss Lyall wants to make your acquaintance, and you must be civil to her for her brother's sake.' And Mrs. Hake nodded and smiled as she left them, for a certain deaf old dowager claimed her attention.

'What a stupid speech!' observed Miss Lyall scornfully. 'Gertrude is not generally so awkward; is she not a handsome woman, Miss Meredith? Do you know, I was her bridesmaid seven years ago.'

'Seven years ago!'

'Yes, does it not sound dreadful? Oh, I feel quite old, I assure you; let me see, I was three-and-twenty last birthday, and Gertrude is six years older than I.'

'I always thought she was five-and-thirty at least.'

'No; Indian suns have faded her a little, that is all; but she is still a fine-looking woman. Nothing is more problematical than age; so many things add or detract from it—climate, weather, moods, and tempers. Now, I don't consider myself a young person at all. I am quite as old as Gertrude —older, in fact; that is because she is so easy-going, and takes life as it comes, and I am a worrier by profession. By

the-bye'—as Gerda looked astonished at this outspoken speech—'I saw you looking at me at dinner; you asked Alick who I was; I read the question on your lips, though I could not hear a word. And then you glanced at me again; when people look at me like that, I am always dying with curiosity to know what they are thinking.'

'You make me feel as though I had been rude, Miss Lyall.'

'Not at all'—fanning herself energetically. 'A cat may look at a king. I believe I repaid your inquiring looks with interest. I was envying you with all my heart.'

'Envying me!' with a little staccato note of astonishment in her voice. What a very original young person Miss Lyall was, to be sure!

'Yes, you are quite the heroine of the evening. You and Alick—Alick is my brother—have been public benefactors. You have furnished us with a fruitful theme for conversation. Did you hear Captain Hake's joke? He does love making a joke. It was not really clever, but we all laughed at it. I really do think you are to be envied, Miss Meredith. Think how your experience of life has been enlarged since you buttered your toast at breakfast this morning. Things so seldom happen. One dresses and undresses, and eats and drinks, and sees one's friends, and that is all.'

'Of course, I know you are not serious. Like Captain Hake, you must be fond of a joke. No one in her senses could envy me such a disagreeable experience.'

'Don't be too sure of anyone's sanity. Most of us have a bee in our bonnet. But I declare you are turning quite pale at the mere recollection. I shall change the subject. Do you know Mr. Fenwick, the gentleman who took me in to dinner—Mr. Hengist Fenwick? He tells me he has a brother Horsa.'

'Yes, I know them both. They are very pleasant and agreeable young men. I think I like Mr. Hengist Fenwick best.'

'I am not at all surprised at that. From what he told me at dinner, his brother must be a prig. I assure you I found him most clever and amusing. Don't you adore lawyers?'

'I don't know. I have never thought about it. Mr Fenwick is the only lawyer I know.'

'How odd! Why, I know a dozen at least. I formed that opinion a great many years ago. They are such well-read men, and know so much about human nature.'

'You might say the same of doctors.'

'Not in the same way. A doctor is always looking at the diseased side of human nature, and the idea is not wholesome. I did so want Alick to be a lawyer, but he is mad on his profession.'

'He is quite right,' returned Gerda softly. 'Next to the clerical, it is the noblest and grandest of all professions. Fancy spending one's whole life in relieving pain!'

Pamela looked at her curiously, and slightly shrugged her shoulders.

'You are an enthusiast, Miss Meredith! What a pity my brother does not hear this panegyric on his beloved profession! He does not hear these sentiments from me. I must own he does not bore or disgust me with any talk about his cases. He is too gentlemanly for that. Besides, it is not professional. But he cannot help being grave and abstracted sometimes, and then I find him poor company.'

'Your brother tells me you live at Cromehurst,' observed Gerda tentatively. She found Miss Lyall's outspoken speeches a little embarrassing. She had no wish to talk of Dr. Lyall, professionally or otherwise. 'Jessie Brown is an old acquaintance of mine.' But Pamela received this piece of intelligence rather indifferently.

'Oh, everyone knows Jessie. But I confess she does not interest me particularly. We are both great talkers, and as I never think that she says anything worth hearing, I find her rather a bore. Don't you hate people who never look beyond the surface of things?'

'I certainly do not hate Jessie. She is a very sweet tempered, sensible girl.'

'Oh, her sweet temper was born with her. There is no merit in that. Jessie's feelings are all nicely padded by nature. Of course, I am civil to her, because her father is Alick's partner. But we have not a taste in common.'

'It seems that I have chosen an unfortunate subject for discussion. I am half afraid to mention my aunt, Mrs. Glyn.'

'Mrs. Glyn!' with a sudden change of manner. 'Oh,

that is quite different. There is no one I like better. And yet I have only known her a few months. We have only lived at Cromehurst since last May. She is one of the most interesting women I know. Is she really your aunt?'

'Yes, my mother's sister—her only sister. But I am afraid we do not see much of her. I am going to stay with her soon. I am very fond of her.'

'That accounts for a certain puzzled feeling that I had when I saw you first. You seemed to remind me of someone. Of course, I see now that it is Mrs. Glyn. Your colouring is very different, but you have her expression. When I paid my first visit, I remember she looked at me in the same quiet searching way, as though she were boring for hidden treasure, and hoped it would come to light presently.'

'How absurd you are!'

'Am I? When you know me better, you will find I am always absurd when I get on with people. I never talk nonsense to Jessie Brown—she would not understand it. Ah! here come the gentlemen. What a time they have been! I suppose Captain Hake has been making some more of his jokes. Alick is steering a straight course to us. Tiresome fellow! I should like to send him away.'

Gerda felt that she could hardly endorse this opinion. Miss Lyall had charmed her with her sprightliness and frankness; even her touch of sharpness, the delicate spleen that had infected some of her speeches, had only added piquancy to her talk; but she was not unwilling to admit Dr. Lyall to the conversation, and she welcomed him with the gentle smile that was habitual to her, but he had scarcely opened his mouth to make a remark, when her cousin came up to her.

'I am sorry to interrupt you, Gerda,' he said; 'but that ass Johnson has put in an appearance half an hour too soon, and now Uncle Godfrey declares that the horses are not to be kept waiting. I always said Johnson ought to have the sack; he has done it on purpose.'

'Nonsense, Gerard! he is only getting a little deaf, poor old man! But must we really go?' and there was a trace of disappointment in her tones. 'It is so early, and Mrs. Hake will think it so unkind to break up her party. Shall I speak to grandpapa?' But Mr. Hamlyn shook his head so decidedly at this, and elevated his eyebrows in such a meaning

fashion, that Gerda took the hint like a wise woman, and rose at once.

'We shall be near neighbours for the next few days,' observed Dr. Lyall, as he shook hands with her, 'so I hope I shall have the pleasure of seeing you again.'

'Of course we shall see Miss Meredith,' interposed his sister in her quick way; 'she is coming to stay at St. Jude's Vicarage soon. Besides, I dare say we shall all be skating in Chesterton Park to-morrow; Gertrude was talking about it this afternoon. Of course you will be there, Miss Meredith?'

'I am quite sure Miss Meredith will do nothing of the kind,' returned Dr. Lyall decidedly. 'If she will take my advice, she will avoid the lake for a day or two,' for his quick eyes had noticed an involuntary shiver on the girl's part.

'I do not know,' was the doubtful reply. 'Doris will be there, and you must all come up to tea at the Hall;' and then she turned away and made her excuses to her hostess, and again Dr. Lyall was conscious of that slight feeling of giddiness, as he joined the group of gentlemen on the hearth-rug.

CHAPTER IV

'HE IS A DEAR, GOOD FELLOW!'

'Actions, looks, words, steps, form the alphabet by which you may spell character.'—LAVATER.

THE drive back to the Hall was happily a short one; nevertheless, Gerda leant back against the cushions and closed her eyes wearily. She was in no mood to enter into the discussion on Johnson's stupidity. At first her grandfather had assented fretfully to Gerard's wrathful remarks, and then all of a sudden he had veered round.

'I could not part with him, you know. He may be a blockhead, as you say, Gerard, but he has lived with me thirty years. I don't believe Dalton gave the order properly. A quarter to eleven, those were my words—a quarter to eleven sharp.'

'And so the carriage was brought round at a quarter-past ten. You should have sent him back, Uncle Godfrey; that would have given him a lesson. I, of course, know the horses must not stand this weather. What right has a servant to interfere with one's evening's enjoyment? I would have sent him back, and he would have been more punctual next time.'

'I dare say you would have done so,' retorted Sir Godfrey crossly. 'You young people only think of your own enjoyment. It would never enter your head that Johnson is getting old, and that sitting on the coach-box in this cutting wind is not likely to improve his rheumatism. You will learn more humanity when you are my age.'

Gerard felt inclined to retort. But he was a good-tempered

fellow, and decided to hold his peace. Johnson's rheumatism was not the cause of this early break-up—he knew better than that. Sir Godfrey was tired, and had hailed the prospect of their speedy departure with rapture. He was getting old as well as Johnson, and he rather missed his evening nap. He had caught at the excuse, and would listen to no plea on his host's part. The horses could have been housed in the stables at Braeside, Johnson could have warmed his old bones in the servants' hall, and Gerda could have finished her conversation with Dr. Lyall, if only he would have listened to reason.

'I'll pension them all off when I am master,' thought Gerard for the hundredth time. 'A pack of lazy old fools!' And then he hummed a tune, and drummed on the frosted window-pane, while Sir Godfrey grumbled on.

The ladies were still in the drawing-room, Dalton informed them, so Sir Godfrey at once betook himself thither, to pour his last real or imaginary grievance into his daughter's attentive ear. As he marched across the hall, with his aristocratic old nose well in the air, Gerard whispered slily in his cousin's ear.

'Poor old boy! he is put out with me because I was hard on Johnson. Did you hear him just now: "Go home, Johnson, and have something hot. I will tell Mrs. Morgan to send you some whisky. We are getting too old to be out in this weather." I believe these too old fellows play into each other's hands. It is an understood thing between them that when the Squire goes out the carriage is to be brought round half an hour earlier than it is ordered.'

'Nonsense, Gerard! how can you talk so ridiculously?'

'Well, I won't. But—eh—what,' staring at her reproachfully, 'you are not going to leave me? Are you aware,' in an injured voice, 'that you have not spoken a word to a fellow all this evening?'

'I am quite sure that I have spoken a great many words to a fellow; indeed, I was talking to one for nearly two hours.'

'Oh, you mean Lyall! Don't try to be funny, my fair Saxon. It does not suit your style at all.'

'I am so tired that I have not a grain of fun left in me. I have a horrible disjointed feeling, as though my limbs don't

belong to me. If you will keep me when I want to go to bed, you might have the courtesy to bring me a chair.'

'You are in a captious mood, I see,' as he obeyed her. And then he relented at the sight of her pale face. 'Poor little thing! I expect that tumble rather upset you. Do you know,' pulling his moustache, and looking at her plaintively, 'I owe that fellow a grudge. I would have given a good deal to have been in his place.'

In spite of her fatigue, Gerda burst out laughing.

'May I ask the reason of this unseemly mirth?' And there was a cloud on Gerard's genial face, though he still spoke in mock wrath. 'Do you think I should not have pulled you out as quickly as he did?'

Gerda restrained her desire to laugh again.

'Don't, Gerard, there's a good boy! Don't pretend to be jealous, or I shall be rude enough to repeat your own words, and say it does not suit your style at all.'

'I never said I was jealous,' in a decidedly aggressive voice. 'You women think such a lot of yourselves. I only said that I wished I had been in his place.'

'And it was very nice of you to say it,' soothingly. 'Don't let us quarrel, Gerard. We never do misunderstand each other, do we?' And there was something pointed in Gerda's tone. 'Did you talk to Miss Lyall at all? Oh, I forgot—there was no time. She is such a droll, amusing little person; but I fancy she has a great deal in her. They live at Cromehurst, and Aunt Clare is a friend of hers. They are going to stay for the remainder of the week at Braeside, so I dare say we shall see a good deal of them.'

'Humph! I have no objection.' And Gerard spoke in his usual good-humoured tone. 'Lyall seems a pleasant fellow, and as pleasant fellows are not as plentiful as blackberries in these benighted parts, one must be thankful if one comes our way now and then.'

'Do you think he has a good practice, Gerard?'

'My dear child, how on earth am I to know Dr. Lyall's private affairs?'

'No, of course not. I only meant—how could he leave his patients for a week?'

'Oh, I see. That is easily answered. Business was slack—doctors have slack times, you know—and he had not

been well, and his partner made him take a week's holiday; he told me so himself.'

'Not well!' and Gerda's face lengthened visibly.

'You are thinking the cold water was rather bracing treatment for an invalid. Don't be afraid; a man of Dr. Lyall's sturdy build is not made of sugar or salt. Now, in spite of your bad treatment of one of the best fellows of my acquaintance, I am going to be magnanimous, and allow you to retire. Say good-night prettily and civilly, and I will light your candle;' and Gerard was as good as his word.

'He is a dear boy, and I am very fond of him!' thought Gerda, as she walked slowly up the broad staircase; but she sighed as she said this, and a troubled look came into her eyes.

The sisters' rooms had a door of communication between them; in fact, Gerda's room could only be reached by passing through Doris's. It was smaller and less convenient in many ways, but it had one advantage in Gerda's eyes—it possessed a window, small-paned and heavily mullioned, with a charming view of the park, and a glimpse of the lake shining between the trees; and this view, so green, so tranquil, was a continual feast to Gerda.

Both rooms were prettily—nay, handsomely—furnished; but the most casual eye would have noted a marked difference in all minor details. If it be true, as some wiscacres have affirmed, that a person's room is a sure exponent of his secret tastes and desires—a sweeping assertion that must be taken with a grain of salt, for frequently it is the exponent of some deceased relative's taste,—these prettily-furnished virginal chambers showed a great dissimilarity in the disposition of the sisters.

Most young people would have given the preference to Doris's room—it was so neat, so charming in its arrangements, so full of girlish nick-nacks. Nothing had been omitted. A little French timepiece ticked on the mantelpiece, vases of fresh flowers were on the toilet-table, some beautifully-framed landscapes and the head of a girl adorned the faintly-stencilled walls, and a small collection of favourite poets—sacred and profane—were arranged in the tiny bookcase.

Gerda's room was equally well furnished, but there was a

touch of severe simplicity in its details. There were no nick-nacks—only a single vase of flowers and some ivory brushes were on the toilet-table.

A proof engraving of 'Mors Janua Vitæ,' hung opposite the bed, and two or three other fine engravings, all of sacred subjects, were carefully arranged on the wall. A carved oak cupboard and antique looking desk, and some books in quaint, heavy bindings, were the only objects that attracted the eye.

A low easy-chair stood beside the fireplace. After a moment's hesitation Gerda sank into it—weariness prevailed against common-sense. She knew she ought to go to bed at once. Her head ached, and she felt oppressed with unusual lassitude.

'I suppose I have been a fool,' she told herself with tardy penitence, for she was never slow in acknowledging her faults to herself or others. Conscience was taking her revenge. Of course, her mother and Doris had been right, and she had been wrong. She had known all the evening that she ought to have been in her own room; and yet how she had insisted to everyone that nothing ailed her, that she was well —perfectly well. She had said as much to Dr. Lyall, and he had calmly looked her in the face, and flatly contradicted her. 'You are not well at all, and unless you rest, you will find that out for yourself to-morrow.' She had thought him very rude at the time. No gentleman, not even a doctor, should contradict a lady; but she was obliged to own now that he was a true prophet. Why had she been such a self-willed goose, and given them all so much trouble? Her mother had almost shed tears over her wilfulness. She had acted in a way that surprised herself, for she had even shown temper to Dr. Lyall. What had made her so anxious to go to this special dinner-party—she, who always voted dinner-parties as altogether ridiculous for young people? Well, her motives had been somewhat mixed, and, in short, she was too tired to try and analyze them. She had been anxious to thank the man who had saved her life. She had even felt some degree of curiosity about him; he had been kind; yes, on the whole, his conversation had interested her, and she had been sorry when it had been interrupted; but, all the same, she was not sure she liked him. He had such a quiet manner—almost a repressive manner. It had kept her in check, somehow. Her

gratitude—her very natural gratitude—had seemed to embarrass him. She had never seen a man so put out of countenance by a few simple remarks. He must be rather reserved—a self-contained, modest sort of person—and yet he looked very clever. Now and then he seemed as though he were laughing at her—yes, she was sure he was satirical. When he knew a person well, he would say teasing things; and yet once or twice there had been something gentle, almost sympathetic, in his tone.

'He has a firm mouth—of course, a doctor ought to be firm, or his patients would not trust him. I wonder why I can't make up my mind if I like him or not. I generally either like or dislike a person at once.' She paused, stifled a yawn, and then muttered under her breath, 'Most decidedly I do not dislike him—on the contrary, I should rather like to talk to him again.'

'You naughty child!' observed a crisp young voice from the outer room. 'Do you know you have never bidden mother good-night? Gerard came in just now and said you had gone to bed. We thought you were chattering to him in the hall. Why'—and here Doris appeared in the doorway—'you have not even taken off your dress yet.'

'I was too tired to move. I forgot mother—shall I go down to her now?'

'For pity's sake, no!—your white face would give her a nightmare. Besides, Grand is talking to her, and he is not exactly in a nice mood. They have got on the old subject; that's why I ran away. Oh dear'—as Gerda shivered—'you are cold! Do make haste, for your bed is so nice and warm. Shall I brush your hair?—you are not a bit fit to do it yourself;' and to this Gerda languidly assented.

'It is so funny!' she said drowsily, as Doris skilfully manipulated the long fair hair that almost enveloped her; 'I am as tired as possible, and yet I do not feel sleepy. How nicely you brush, Dorrie—so smoothly and quietly! You have no idea how soothing it is when one's head aches.'

'Have you got a headache, poor dear?' in a delightfully sympathetic voice. 'I am so sorry; I wanted to talk to you about the dinner-party. Gerard said Dr. Lyall took you in to dinner—but I suppose I must not ask any questions; it will only make your head worse.'

'I do not mind talking if you will only go on brushing. Yes, Dr. Lyall took me in to dinner, and we had a long talk. Is it not strange—he lives at Cromehurst, and they actually know Aunt Clare! When we went into the drawing-room Mrs. Hake introduced his sister to me.'

'Is she nice?'

'Yes, I think so; but she is very original. I never heard anyone talk in quite the same way; but I found her very interesting.'

'Is she pretty?'

'Well, not exactly. I thought so at dinner—she sat nearly opposite to me—and I was very much struck with her, and asked Dr. Lyall if he knew her name: he was so amused. She is little and dark; and when she talks and laughs a beautiful colour comes into her face, and makes her look so brilliant; but she is not a bit pretty really, it is only her colouring and animation. Her nose is rather aggressively pointed and obstinate looking, and her lips are too thin and close too firmly for a girl. But I must own she has bewildering eyes.'

'Dear me, Gerda! what a description! I have never seen a pair of bewildering eyes in my life.'

'I think I mean eyes that puzzle you a little, and set you wondering about their owner. Miss Lyall's eyes never looked the same for long together. One minute they were sparkling with fun and animation, and the next they had a wistful, melancholy look in them. They had always that expression when she was silent.'

'I mean to make her acquaintance to-morrow. She has evidently bewitched you—you so seldom seem interested in people. You don't tell me how you liked Dr. Lyall. I cannot say he made much impression on me, but, then, I only saw him for ten minutes. I don't like a rough brown moustache.'

'A rough brown moustache!' in rather a surprised tone.

'Yes; Dr. Lyall seems by no means particular about his personal appearance. And he looked so small and insignificant beside Gerard. Gerard was handsomer than ever this evening.'

'So you always say. I believe you are half in love with him yourself. Oh! you hurt me then. Did you pull my

hair to punish me for my naughty speech? I was only in fun, Doris. You need not turn so red—I can see your reflection in the looking-glass, and you are the colour of a peony!'

'I shall leave off brushing your hair if you make such disagreeable remarks;' and Doris walked away in girlish dudgeon, but Gerda caught her by the dress.

'You silly child, to mind my absurd joke! Give me a kiss directly, and I will promise never to do it again. Come and sit down for a moment—I must ask one question. What was Grand talking about when you left the drawing-room?'

'Do you really want to know?'—rather reluctantly

'Yes—yes—please tell me as quickly as possible.'

'Well, he told mother that he was getting sick and tired of all this procrastination, and that he meant to have a serious talk with Gerard on the first opportunity.'

'Oh dear! oh dear!'

'He said he did not believe it was Gerard's fault at all—that you were simply playing with him out of girlish perversity and nonsense; that all this stand-offishness on your part meant nothing but temper; and that mother ought to scold you into reason.'

'I don't fancy mother will try that plan,' was the dry response.

'No, poor mother looked so worried. Really, Grand gives her no peace! Should you not hate to be in her position?—she is so utterly dependent on him.'

'Not more dependent than you or I, Doris.'

'True; but, then, we are young, and have a hundred ways of amusing ourselves; we are not always at his beck and call as mother is. When anything goes wrong she always has to bear the brunt of it. It is Honoria this and Honoria that from morning to night. If I were mother, I should hate the sound of my own name.'

'Poor dear mother! she is terribly afraid of him. If only she had Aunt Clare's spirit!'

'I don't agree with you. I dare say Aunt Clare repents of having her own way. I don't believe Uncle Horace makes her really happy. I am quite sure by this time that she has repented marrying for love.'

'I shall tell her what you say one day.'

Then Doris made a little face at her sister.

'She will be dreadfully shocked, and preach sentiment for an hour on end, from sheer sense of duty. Ah, Dorrie, what a stupid world this is! What business has Grand to tyrannize over us in this medieval fashion, and insist on our being in love with each other? Such nonsense! when we have known each other from babyhood.'

'I don't see that makes any difference. Gerard is really very fond of you.'

'So am I of him. He is a dear, good fellow; I know no one better. He ought to marry the best woman in the world.'

'That is exactly what he means to do;' and Doris gave her a loving little hug.

'No, dear,' rather solemnly; 'but, all the same, I have no wish to undervalue myself. And I think I deserve more than Gerard is ever likely to offer me.'

'Why, you would be mistress of the Hall, Gerda!'—opening her eyes rather widely at this. 'The future Lady Hamlyn would be a rich woman—immensely rich!'

'What nonsense! As though I were thinking of anything so sublunary! That is your great fault, Doris: you are so dreadfully matter-of-fact. I love the dear old Hall, but, all the same, it does not follow that I should marry its master. Don't you see, goosie, we are neither of us in love with each other. Sometimes Gerard tries to make me believe that he is, but it is only pretence, and, with all his efforts, the poor boy does not do it well. There, I have worked myself up and made my head worse! Please don't talk to me any more. If Grand is in his second childhood, I have just cut my wisdom teeth—so friends and relatives may beware of me.' And with these oracular words Gerda patted her sister on the shoulder in a patronizing fashion, and entreated to be left alone.

'There will be an awful tussle one day, and then I shall have to go to Aunt Clare,' she said to herself as she laid her head on the pillow and closed her aching eyes; but it was a long time before she could sleep. Once, just as she was dropping off into a doze, she seemed to hear the sudden crack of the ice, and felt herself sinking in the cold water, and roused up with a shudder, to find a displaced log had fallen noisily on the hearth, and that the old grandfather's clock in the hall was striking two.

CHAPTER V

A PAGE OUT OF THE HAMLYN RECORDS

Men study women as they study the barometer; but they do not understand until the day after.'—*Thoughts of a Queen.*

GERDA awoke in a beautiful frame of mind the next morning. To be sure, her head still ached, but there were no bad symptoms. She was neither feverish nor shivering; no rheumatic pains racked her young limbs, and only a pleasing sense of languor induced her to yield to Doris's entreaties to lie still and take her breakfast in bed.

She was generally restive in such matters, and inclined to resist all such advice. She had a youthful dislike to any form of coddling. Mrs. Meredith was a woman who loved to exercise her maternal surveillance in season and out of season. A cold, a headache, even a finger-ache, would furnish her with an excuse for a little extra petting. It must be confessed that Gerda received those attentions somewhat impatiently, and was much given to keeping her ailments to herself.

'Don't let mother trouble to come up and see me,' had been her parting charge to Doris, and Doris had nodded an assent. Nevertheless, an hour had not passed before Gerda heard her mother's voice at the door asking for admittance.

'Were you asleep, dear? Have I disturbed you?'—kissing her. 'How shockingly pale you look! Doris says you have a headache. I think I shall ask Dr. Reynolds to look in after luncheon.'

'My dear mother,' and Gerda's placidity vanished in a

moment, 'what an absurd idea! What do I want with Dr. Reynolds? I am quite well, and only a little lazy, so Doris begged me to rest. Of course, if you talk to me in this fashion, I shall have to get up at once, to prove to you that I am all right.'

'You will do nothing of the kind. What a troublesome child you are, Gerda! Well, we will not talk about Dr. Reynolds just now. I had a bad night myself. And no wonder, after all that fright and worry. And then, just because I felt as though I could bear nothing more, your grandfather kept me talking until nearly midnight.'

Gerda winced, and grew hot. She knew what was coming. Mrs. Meredith, in spite of many excellent qualities, was wholly without tact. It was by no means her habit to keep her troubles to herself. Her father gave her a great deal to bear, and she indemnified herself for her forbearance and patience to the old man by much bemoaning of her hard fate to her young daughters. And it must be owned she generally received from them a vast amount of sympathy. The girls had long ago made up their minds that their mother was kept in undue subjection. 'Grand is always so hard on poor mother,' they would say to each other. And Gerda, who had plenty of courage, would sometimes tell her grandfather so to his face.

Mrs. Meredith was a delicate-looking woman, with a soft voice and subdued manner. Her spirit had never been a high one, and her many troubles had effectually quenched it.

In her young womanhood she had been exceedingly pretty —far prettier than either of her daughters, as Sir Godfrey was often pleased to tell them; but no one would have guessed this fact from looking at her faded, gentle face.

His elder daughter had been Sir Godfrey's favourite. She had been a handsome, strong-willed girl, and she had showed her determination in persisting in marrying a poor curate, who had had the audacity to fall in love with her; and great and unappeasable had been Sir Godfrey's wrath and grief at this shameful mésalliance, as he termed it.

The Chesterton estates were strictly entailed, and Sir Godfrey's only brother, Captain Hamlyn, was his heir. Sir Godfrey's wife, a woman of good birth, had brought him little or no money, so her daughters were wholly dependent

on their father's goodwill, and Clarice—or Clare, as she was commonly called—soon found herself practically disinherited.

For some years no invitation had been extended to her or her husband, and though Captain Hamlyn had at last interfered in a good-natured way, and had brought about a reconciliation, Clare had never felt herself to be forgiven.

Her visits to the Hall were few and far between, and, with the exception of his first formal acceptance of his father-in-law's hospitality, it was noticed that the Rev. Horace Glyn never accompanied his wife.

He was a proud, hard-tempered man, and he would not eat bread offered to him in such a grudging fashion.

'Honoria always says that father will come round one day,' his wife would say to him.

She thought, for their children's sake, that the old man should be humoured, but Mr. Glyn could tolerate no such feminine sophistry.

'You may go as often as you like, my dear,' he would answer coldly; 'indeed, it is your duty to do so from time to time, especially as your father is growing old. But you must excuse me if I remind you that it is no duty of mine.'

'Not for Walter's sake?' she had once added rather pleadingly, for her boy was as the apple of her eye; and then he had turned upon her almost savagely.

'No, not for Walter's sake,' he had replied. 'I suppose our children are as dear to me as they are to you, but not even to benefit them will I crawl into a man's house when I know that he hates me, and grudges me every mouthful that I eat under his roof;' and after this she had dared to say no more.

Poor Clare! she was a high-spirited woman, but she had found her master; and though she loved her husband with the intensity and tenacity of a strong nature, it may be doubted whether he made her perfectly happy.

Horace Glyn was ascetic both by habit and conviction. He was a man who on principle would have denied himself any unnecessary luxury, even if he could have afforded it; but straitened means had for many years debarred him even from the ordinary comforts.

Since then the living of St. Jude's had been offered him, and though it was by no means a very lucrative piece of pre-

ferment, it had lifted him out of the mire of poverty; and, after his own stern fashion, he had rejoiced and owned himself thankful. But his rejoicings had been feeble compared to his wife's boundless gratitude.

Clare had gallantly struggled through their season of poverty. Her love for her husband had prevented her from adding to his burdens by any undue repinings, but those years had told upon her. She had suffered, and her pride had suffered; but she had kept her trouble to herself. In later years she had unbosomed herself to her niece Gerda. A warm attachment had grown up between them, and Clare had tasted a new pleasure in Gerda's sympathy.

To her she would speak of her love for her old home, of her affection for every familiar spot. 'Honoria never cared for these things as much as I did,' she would say with a sigh, as she recalled some mossy hollow in the park, where the first violets blossomed, or the bank where they found daffodils, all a-blowing and a-growing, one March afternoon. There were other confidences between the aunt and niece—feminine confidences, that would have shocked the austere soul of Horace Glyn. Clare would confess, with much compunction, that the old Adam was as strong as ever within her—that years of poverty had not quenched her love of softness and pretty things. Gerda soon found out why her dearly-loved aunt came so seldom to the Hall.

'I should only put you all to shame with my shabby gowns and home-trimmed bonnets,' she said, with a little laugh. 'Here it does not matter. A Vicar's wife may always look shabby, and no one blames her. They only think it sets a good example. Horace would hate to see me too well dressed. He would read texts to me out of Timothy. If I want a new dress I often go without one, because I am so afraid of vexing him. He never can understand how quickly women's clothes wear out, especially now dress materials are so cheap.'

'I call it a shame of Uncle Horace,' Gerda replied, with youthful passion and vexation in her voice—for she was by no means over-fond of her stern uncle. 'You are such a good-looking woman, Aunt Clare, and when you are well dressed no one can look nicer. He ought to be proud of you, instead of begrudging you a few yards of stuff.'

'Your Uncle Horace is proud of me after his own fashion,'

replied Mrs. Glyn, with a soft, peculiar smile. 'And he treats me better than he treats himself. He does not understand how much these things are to a woman. A shabby coat or an old hat—aren't old hats odious, Gerda?—do not give him an instant's pain. It is our small minds, my dear, that inflict these minor miseries on us. I believe in his heart he is disappointed that I do not grow up to his perfections. He would like me to be as indifferent to these things as he is himself.'

'But that is impossible. Surely Uncle Horace remembers the beautiful home from which he took you, and that your surroundings were utterly different from his. He has always had such a hard life. You have told me so. But you have been accustomed to luxury and comfort from your very babyhood.'

'Of course he remembers it. But he thinks it ought to be banished from my recollection. "When you did me the honour of marrying me," he has said more than once to me, "you knew you were to be a poor man's wife. You gave up a great deal for me, and I believe I am not ungrateful for the sacrifice. But it is too late now to regret the flesh-pots of Egypt." Was not that speech enough to crush one?'

'Never mind,' returned Gerda, kissing her eagerly. 'In spite of his hard speeches, Uncle Horace thinks there is no one like you.' And in this opinion Gerda's girlish shrewdness was not at fault. 'He thinks it his duty to make that sort of speech. You must come to the Hall, Aunt Clare. Who minds whether your gowns are shabby or not? I wish mamma had more money, and then she would buy you some. But Grand always looks into the accounts. If we have too many new dresses he grumbles, and says we shall ruin him.'

Gerda's remark might appear strange to anyone who was not conversant with the family history. But it was not the least part of Mrs. Meredith's troubles that she and her girls were so dependent on Sir Godfrey. Owing to some flaw in her marriage settlement—some culpable oversight on the lawyer's part—the greater part of her modest dowry had been squandered by her husband during their brief married life.

Honoria had married with her father's approval. She had been more fortunate than her sister, and had been able to gratify her inclinations without hindrance or contradiction

from her natural guardian, and for a short time things had gone smoothly with the young couple.

Algernon Meredith had very little money of his own, but he was well connected, and his chief recommendation in Sir Godfrey's eyes was that he was the heir of his uncle, Lord Galveston, a peer much noted among his fellows for his eccentricity and his brief, telling speeches in the House. Great was Sir Godfrey's consternation when the news reached his ears that this worthy nobleman, already showing signs of dotage and senility—in reality he was a hale, vigorous man of sixty-two—was on the eve of marriage with a young American beauty, whose sprightly charms had captivated his elderly fancy.

For a long time Sir Godfrey refused to credit these tidings. But it soon proved no rumour, and before another year had passed Lady Galveston had given birth to a fine boy, and all chance of Algernon's succession to his uncle's title and estates was rendered null and void.

The young Captain of Hussars took his disappointment lightly. He was an easy-going fellow, and was accustomed to take life as it came. If he were a scapegrace, he was a lovable scapegrace, and was no man's enemy but his own.

The luck was dead against him, that was all; but, as he pointed out to his wife, it was now his father-in-law's duty to maintain them. Chesterton Hall was quite as comfortable quarters as Galveston Castle—in fact, of the two, he rather preferred the former; and though Sir Godfrey could not be brought to regard the matter in the same light, he nevertheless tolerated his son-in-law's society with less grumbling than might have been expected under the circumstances.

How long his patience would have lasted is extremely doubtful, but before Doris was a year old, Algernon Meredith's life terminated abruptly. He had entered some races as gentleman jockey, and was brought home a corpse. At the last hurdle his horse had fallen with him, and he had broken his neck.

Poor Honoria had mourned for him long and faithfully. With all his faults and follies, he had been an affectionate husband to her, and, woman-like, she had shut her eyes to his defects of character.

After his own fashion, her father attempted to console her

He made much of her and the children, and was never weary of pointing out that it was her duty to rouse herself for the sake of her baby-girls.

In spite of a good heart, Sir Godfrey was an autocrat even then. He begrudged his daughter no comfort. He was lavish in his gifts to her, but he expected her to conform to all his opinions and caprices.

Sir Godfrey hated the outward garb of mourning, and the sight of prolonged grief made him impatient. To please him, Mrs. Meredith soon laid aside her widow's weeds ; and though she did not cease to weep for her young husband, she at least took care that her tears should be shed in secret. On only one point she ventured to oppose him. A few years afterwards he proposed that she should marry again. He had found an excellent match for her—their neighbour, a wealthy bachelor, had made overtures for the hand of the young widow. Even a worm will turn, and Honoria's womanly indignation at this proposal silenced Sir Godfrey at once and for ever.

'Pooh, pooh, my dear!' he said fretfully, as she had finished her remonstrance with a fit of passionate crying ; 'you are talking nonsense. Young widows marry again every day, and no one blames them ; indeed, St. Paul recommended them to do so—you may read that for yourself. Poor Algy was the last man to wish you to go on making yourself miserable for his sake ; and, after all, he was not such a loss, poor fellow ! Remember, he gambled away your money.'

'Do not speak to me of his faults, father. I will not hear it, even from you ;' and Honoria's eyes flashed so fiercely through her tears that Sir Godfrey drew back in alarm. Was her grief turning her brain? Then she melted, and caught her little Doris to her breast. 'What does it matter what he did with my money? He was my husband, and I begrudged him nothing—nothing! Father, you do not mean to be unkind, but you do not understand. I am Algy's widow, and I will remain so. When you are tired of me and the children, you must send us away, and I will work for them and myself too.'

'Tut, tut, don't talk nonsense!' was all his answer ; but there had been a glistening in his cold blue eyes, and his voice was a trifle husky.

Honoria noticed that her father treated her with a good deal of consideration for a long time after this conversation; perhaps in his heart he respected her all the more for her fealty and devotion to the dead. Certainly, he never again alluded to a second marriage.

Sir Godfrey had had his troubles too. His only brother had died a very few years after his marriage, leaving his widow and one child, a baby, to his fraternal care. Clare and Honoria were children then, and their cousin, the elder Gerard, had been their favourite playmate at Chesterton Hall.

But the same fatality overtook him, just as he was in the prime of youth and happiness. He was attacked by some malarious fever in an Indian village, where he and two or three other officers were camping out, and he died without even having seen the child to whom his wife had just given birth.

Sir Godfrey had loved his nephew dearly; but before many years were over he had transferred his affections to the younger Gerard, and after his mother's death he had sent for the boy to the Hall, and had treated him as his own son. When the girls grew up, a new idea occurred to him—what a good thing it would be if Gerard and Gerda were to take a fancy to each other!

Gerard would have the estate; but Honoria and her children still needed provision. Sir Godfrey's fortune was only moderate—to settle his daughter comfortably in the dower-house, and provide handsomely for his grand-daughters would certainly impoverish his resources—and yet he was desirous of doing his duty to his own flesh and blood. To be sure, as conscience whispered, Clare was his own flesh and blood too, and his first-born as well; but he would not listen to this suggestion. 'Clare has made her bed, and must lie in it,' he thought; 'she must reap the wages of disobedience. No money of mine shall go into Horace Glyn's pocket; Honoria has always been dutiful—I must certainly provide for her and her children.'

Gerard had just finished his Oxford career, and had taken a satisfactory degree, to his own unmitigated astonishment, when this pet scheme that had been simmering in his great-uncle's brain was duly laid before him.

Gerard, who was easy-going by nature, showed no repug-

nance to the plan. He was fond of his cousin Gerda. She was not especially pretty; but he thought her clever and amusing, and they had always been great chums. As he was not in love with anyone else, and his uncle's arguments appeared conclusive, he was soon brought to say that, if Gerda would have him, he had no objections to marry her.

'She will have you, my boy!' returned Sir Godfrey rather hilariously, as he clapped his heir on the shoulder. 'What can she find against you—a fine-built, athletic fellow like you, who will treat her kindly, and give her her own way? Try her, Gerard—both the girls are young, and have never had a lover—it is first come, first served, in most cases; and I expect it will be so in hers.'

Gerard was not quite so sure of this. He knew enough of girls already to make him a little doubtful of results. Gerda was not the girl to say 'Yes' unless she was quite sure of herself. She would demand a good deal from the man whom she accepted as her husband; but he had pledged his word to Sir Godfrey, and one fine spring evening, as he was rowing her on the lake in Chesterton Park, he seized his opportunity and spoke to her.

It was evident that he had taken her completely by surprise; for as he looked at her, he saw that she turned very pale. She was silent for full five minutes, and he was still leaning on his oars watching her, when she glanced up at him rather sharply.

'This is not your own idea, Gerard; somebody has put this into your head.'

'My dear girl!'—in rather an offended voice.

'Oh, please don't speak in that injured tone! Of course, I am not answering you properly——' And here Gerda broke into a nervous little laugh that made Gerard feel still more uncomfortable. He had quite worked himself by his eloquence to believe he really wished this thing, and his cousin's manner did not altogether please him: 'Do be good, Gerard, and tell me who first suggested this. Was it Grand, or'—knitting her brows thoughtfully—'but, no, it could not be mother?'

'Why should it be anyone? Upon my word, Gerda, you are treating a fellow very badly! I dare say I have been a bit abrupt, and that you are not quite prepared for this;

but if you will think over it quietly, and give me your answer later on, I won't press or hurry you. You may not think much of me'—with a touch of real feeling in his voice that made Gerda blush—'but I am awfully fond of you, and I am sure I should make you a good husband.'

'I am sure you would.' And here Gerda raised her eyes and looked at him contemplatively, as though she were trying to picture him in that character. 'Thank you, Gerard dear! You have done that very nicely, and it almost sounded as though you meant it; but'—suddenly beaming at him with a smile—'you and I know better than that. Have we not been just like brother and sister all our lives? We will not go and spoil everything just because Grand has got this foolish idea in his dear old head.'

'Do you mean you won't try to like me?' And Gerard's tone was as persuasive as though his whole life's happiness were dependent on her answer. He was a man, and he did not like to be beaten.

'I do like you—I love you dearly, Gerard; but I am not going to cheat you into the belief that it is the sort of love you are asking. Put this ridiculous idea out of your head. We never shall care for each other in that way.'

'I am not so sure of that'—for her opposition put him on his mettle. In reality, he was secretly relieved at her decision; he did not care about being engaged just then; the whole thing bored him. He wanted to go and hunt bison on the American prairies with some friends of his who were just starting. He would rather eat buffalo-hump with his comrades than make love to the best and prettiest girl in the world. Nevertheless, he could not refrain from a last word.

'I will have another try, and you can just think it over,' he had said, as he took up the oars again.

But to this she had made no reply. She had given him her opinion firmly and kindly. If he chose to spoil things, and put their comfortable friendship on an uneasy footing, that was his fault, not hers.

Sir Godfrey was much chagrined when Gerard informed him of his failure; but he cheered up when the young man avowed his intention of making another attempt.

'That is right, my boy!—faint heart ne'er won fair lady. There is nothing like sticking to a woman, and letting her see

that you mean it. Go away for a few months, and shoot as many buffaloes as you can; and then, when you come back, tackle her boldly—very likely she'll give you a different answer.'

So Gerard took his departure gaily, and shot his big game, and sat over his camp-fires, singing choruses to his companions' songs, and enjoyed his life with the zest of an honest, light-hearted young Englishman.

But, with all his fun, he did not forget his cousin; and even in Canada and New York, where he danced with many beautiful girls, and made love to them in his easy-going, lazy way, he never really lost his heart to one of them. He was in no hurry to go back to Gerda; he did not find absence from her at all irksome or wearisome; neither did he treasure her few letters with a lover's care. But when he saw her again, and she came to meet him with the gentle, affectionate smile with which she always greeted her favourites, he was dimly conscious that she was more interesting to him than other girls, and that it was a comfortable sort of thing to be talking to her again.

He had been back at the Hall nearly two months now; but up to this time he had not tried again, in spite of sundry strong hints and not a little grumbling on Sir Godfrey's part. And Gerda was beginning to hope that the troublesome question would not be put to her a second time.

CHAPTER VI

'IT SHALL BE NOBODY'

'To struggle against friends true courage is required. It is like putting out your fire to remain in the cold.'—*Thoughts of a Queen.*

WHEN Gerda heard her mother's meaning tone she moved restlessly under her eider-down. Why had she allowed herself to be taken at this disadvantage? she thought, with an inward groan. Why had she been weak enough to yield to Doris's persuasions to lie still and rest? Of what avail such rest, if she were compelled to listen to her mother's arguments?

A certain expression on Mrs. Meredith's face, an ominous droop of the mouth, and the little nervous cough that prefaced her remarks, warned her of the gravity of the situation.

'When there is anything on one's mind it is always best to talk it all out,' as Mrs. Meredith had once observed; to which Gerda had replied dryly: 'No doubt it is highly desirable to shift one's burdens on other people's shoulders; for it is not always possible,' she went on, with youthful sententiousness, 'to ease one's mind unless the weight be deposited on your neighbour's.' For, with all her dutifulness, Gerda could be a little sarcastic at times.

Mrs. Meredith had her knitting in her hands—she was an industrious woman, and never wasted time. As she began to speak her needles moved rapidly. Somehow, that clicking accompaniment added to Gerda's inward irritation.

'Your grandfather talked to me very seriously last night,

Gerda,' she began, not looking at her daughter as she spoke. 'Something must have put him out, for he seemed very fidgety. He began about Johnson, and then all at once he veered round to the old subject. Somehow, he seems to think that it is all my fault that you and Gerard have failed to come to an understanding.'

'I hope you told Grand to mind his own business?'

'Indeed, I did nothing of the kind'—knitting still more rapidly. 'How could you think that I could answer your grandfather after such a fashion! You ought to be too well aware of our position by this time. Do you want him to remind us that we owe him the very bread we eat!'

'Oh, I am quite sure that he will remind us of that!'

'Do you think that it can be pleasant to listen to such speeches, Gerda? to be told continually that I and my children are burdens? that except for his bounty we should be paupers? For your sakes I have borne a good deal; but last night I felt as though the weight of it all were too heavy for me.'

'Poor mother! It is dreadfully hard on you. He has no right to make you feel your dependent position. It is cruel and unfeeling.'

'He does not mean to be cruel; in reality, he is as fond of you and Doris as though you were his own children. He is an old man, Gerda, and old men are crotchety sometimes. He told me last night, with tears in his eyes, that his heart was set on this match, and that he wished it for both your sakes. "You must talk to her," he said more than once. "You are her mother, and ought to have influence with her; make the child see that she cannot do better for herself. There is not a finer young fellow to be found in England. As lads go, he is sound and honest to the core."'

'So he is. Grand was quite right there.'

Mrs. Meredith's face brightened. She had not expected this ready acquiescence.

'I am sure there are very few young men as good as Gerard. He has the sweetest temper in the world; and then he is so fond of you. Don't shake your head, Gerda! He told your grandfather the other night, as seriously as possible, that, as far as he was concerned, he was ready and willing to marry you to-morrow.'

A sudden flush crossed Gerda's face.

'I am very much obliged to him,' she observed resentfully' 'but in a question of marriage there are two people to be considered.'

'Yes, dear'—in a soothing voice—'I am quite aware of that; but when Gerard spoke to you, you were taken by surprise, and it was natural that you should not be ready with the answer that he wished; but now you have had time to think it over, and really Gerard himself has so improved!'

'Mother,' interrupting her impatiently,'what is the use of saying all this? Grand will have to give up this ridiculous project: I shall never marry Gerard—never! I know myself and him far too well to make such a mistake. If he speaks to me again, I shall tell him so plainly, and then very likely he will quarrel with me—oh, dear, how sad that will be!—but I shall not be able to help myself. Men are such odd, contradictory creatures! They want you to believe all that they choose to tell you. Gerard is not a bit in love with me, but he has got it into his head that we are to marry each other; and if I say, "No, thank you," he will be as offended as possible.'

'Oh, Gerda!' And at her mother's horrified voice Gerda's sharp tones softened.

'Poor dear mother! I forgot that you would be a sufferer too. What a temper Grand will be in when Gerard tells him! I expect that I shall have to take refuge with Aunt Clare, for I shall be sent to Coventry. To be sure, Grand cannot lock me up in my room, or condemn me to bread and water; but all the same, our meals will be terrible. You and Doris will not dare to open your lips to me in his presence, and I shall have to be grateful if Dalton does not forget to hand me the vegetables.'

'It is no laughing matter, I assure you, Gerda,' returned her mother dismally; 'and if I believed you I should be wretched at the prospect before us; but you are only a girl, and will change your mind. If you cared for anyone else, of course, it would be different; but neither you nor Doris have seen anyone.'

'You mean it must be Gerard or Nobody? Then in that case it shall be Nobody. Thank you, mother dear, for putting the matter so clearly before me. After all, I am not

sure that it is a blessing to be born a girl; the men have much the best of it. If Gerard be angry with me he can go and console himself with a hundred delightful girls; but for poor unlucky me there is only Nobody.'

'Gerda, I do wish you would not talk so absurdly!'

'On the contrary, I think I am talking very sensibly, and you must allow that I did not begin the subject. After all, marrying need not be the sole end and aim of a girl's life. I know most people think so, but I choose to differ from them, and I should not be a bit surprised if I and Nobody have a tolerably pleasant life of it.'

'I think I had better go down to Doris.' Mrs. Meredith's voice was a little injured; but the spirit of mischief had taken possession of Gerda.

'After all, I am glad to know my fate,' she continued smoothly. 'I think I am rather to me envied. Think how delightful it will be to please Nobody—to expect Nobody—to quarrel with Nobody! I wonder what Gerard will think of his rival? There is no fear of them coming to blows.'

But Mrs. Meredith made no reply to this girlish jest. She only sighed once—a weary, oppressed sigh—as she closed the door. It was not the first time Gerda had proved too much for her. There were contradictions in the girl's nature that baffled her. She loved both her children dearly, but there were more points of sympathy between her and Doris. Doris's character was simpler and less complex; she was less clever than Gerda, and she made fewer demands on human nature. Doris cared for most people; Gerda admitted only a favoured few into her confidence; her fastidiousness was hard to please, and she saw faults where Doris only saw virtues. This reserve, and a secret craving to find perfection, imposed limits to her enjoyment, and prepared the way for inevitable disappointment. It is always a mistake to ask too much from one's fellow-creatures. There are flaws and defects in the noblest natures; imperfections and deficiencies—the taint and blemish of original sin—meet one at every turn; it is wiser to make allowances, to be less clear-sighted as to our neighbours' shortcomings. Gerda was guilty of this grievous error of judgment; her own aims were lofty, and she was too ready to condemn others who were satisfied

with a lower plane of thought and action. She was not content to try and live up to her own ideal, but she insisted that others should do the same.

She had driven her mother away with a girlish jest, but as soon as she was left alone her mood changed. As she dressed, she questioned herself somewhat sadly. From a child Gerda had been subject to sudden fits of gravity. She would relapse into strange silent moods, of which she could give no adequate account. Once, when a mere infant, her mother had found her sitting in a corner, with her tiny hands clasped over her eyes.

'Don't 'peak to me, mammie; I am having a big fink,' she observed solemnly; and this precocious speech had been treasured in the mother's memory, and had become a family joke.

Gerda felt herself on the edge of a 'big think' now, as she stood looking out on the low gray skies and the bare branches of the elms. The sombre, wintry prospect outside her warm room seemed to frame her thoughts fitly. Her mother's words had imparted a touch of frost to the moral atmosphere around her—a chill breath of impending trial, of sudden dilemma, filled her with foreboding. What had she done to bring this trouble on herself?—for in her secret soul she owned it a trouble. Hitherto things had been smooth with her; if her life had been uneventful and a trifle monotonous, it had presented no difficulties; there was no dissonance in her environment; certain phases of youthful discontent that had been habitual to her had only been like the rising of healthy sap in some vigorous tree—a sign of life and growth—for even discontent may prove nobility of nature.

'With all my faults I have always been true to myself,' she thought, with a sudden bitter presentiment—that holding to the truth under certain conditions may mean martyrdom.

It is always a hard matter for a girl, however high her spirit may be, to set herself in direct opposition to her lawful governors—parental or otherwise. It is reading St. Paul's precepts upside down—giving them a contrary meaning; the 'Children, obey' seems to tingle in her ears ever after. Gerda had plenty of spirit, but she was gentle by

nature, and had been brought up in a good old-fashioned way; she had an invincible dislike to hurt anyone's feelings, especially the feelings of those who were set in authority over her. She would inveigh against them in her honest, downright fashion—she might even air her weapons of sarcasm and girlish obstinacy; but when the moment of decision came, the disappointment she must inflict would give her intense pain.

'I am too thin-skinned,' she said to herself with a sigh; 'one's nature ought to be more tough when one has an unpleasant duty to perform. I know it will make me miserable to disappoint Grand, but I ought not to mind that. The question is, Is it my duty to marry Gerard?' But even as she asked herself the question, she dismissed it with a sudden shrug of impatience. 'I will marry Nobody—Nobody will be the best,' she said to herself, as she prepared to leave her room.

She lingered a moment on the staircase as Doris's voice reached her ear—staccato with horrified amazement:

'Oh, Gerard, how horrible!'

Gerda looked over the balustrade from the same point of view that Dr. Lyall had chosen the previous night; the hall was neutral territory, and was not considered a place for secrets. Gerda had no scruples of conscience as she leant against the carved oak balustrade, and calmly contemplated the couple who were so cosily ensconced on the seat in the oriel window. They were far too much occupied to notice the interloper. Gerard was polishing a pair of skates, and telling his story at the same time, and Doris's curly head was very near him; she had a small black kitten in her arms—which was known in the family by the name of Methuselah — and her cheek rested against the sooty coat of the little animal as she watched the process of skate-polishing.

'Of course it was rather awkward,' went on Gerard, as he paused to admire the results of his labour. Gerard's hands were never idle; the lounging, feckless ways of most young men were abhorrent to him; his spare indoor hours were always well employed.

His den, as he called it—a large cheerful room opening out of the hall—held numerous tokens of his industry—a

lathe, a photographic apparatus, and a half-finished fishing-net, while various specimens of carving, and materials for making flies, bore witness to the fact that Gerard liked to vary his employments.

Doris had always taken an intelligent interest in these pursuits; nothing pleased her better than an invitation to the den to help Gerard tie flies, or to watch him at his lathe; he was always so engrossed by his work, and he whistled over it in such a light-hearted fashion, she often wondered why Gerda did not share her interest. When Gerda entered the den, it was generally with an air of protest, and a shrug over its untidiness; she hinted at times that Gerard might find better employment than cleaning his gun or carving ugly little chessmen.

'You are always too busy to open a book, Gerard,' she would say sometimes. 'Carving is all very well, but you never find time to read; you let your mind rust.'

Gerard always took these reproofs very lightly. He was no reader; he was obliged to confess that the serious books that Gerda loved would have bored him excessively; the paper, or an exciting novel when he was tired or lazy, constituted Gerard's literature.

'Everyone to his own taste, my fair Saxon,' he would say good-humouredly; 'one man's meat is another man's poison. Why cannot we agree to differ? You are a sensible girl—just answer me that. I don't quarrel with you for your infatuation for Carlyle and Emerson, but you should not be down on a fellow because he prefers tying flies to all the essays that ever were written.'

'I am not quarrelling with you, Gerard,' Gerda would answer rather sadly, 'and I would not interfere with any of your favourite pursuits for the world; but it is the duty of every human being to improve his or her mind. How are you to hold your own among other men if you let yourself rust like this?'

But Gerda might as well have talked to the wind. Gerard never contradicted her; he even suffered her to put some favourite author on his table beside his pipes and tackle; but the weeks passed, and the book was never opened.

'Well, it was awkward, you know,' went on Gerard, feel

ing a certain pleasant zest in Doris's wide blue eyes and riveted attention; 'and I confess I felt pretty bad at that moment, and wished I had held my tongue. There was no one near us in the shanty, and he was such a big, hulking ruffian, with a fist that might have felled an ox; and the liquor he had taken had not improved his temper, you see. A bowie-knife is not a pleasant weapon, and he had a revolver besides, while Seymour and I had not even a stick between us.

'"I'll teach you, stranger, to insult an American citizen!" he begins, with a horrid grin—I can see the brute now—and out came the knife. Well, what does Seymour do?—you know what a dapper little fellow Seymour is, hardly up to my shoulder, but as cool as brass—he is a plucky chap is Seymour!

'"My dear sir," he said, stepping between us as quietly as possible, "don't take any notice of this poor fellow"; and here he actually tapped his forehead in a very significant way. "Brain-fever, you know, from over-work; could not be trusted anywhere alone; contradicts and argues with every man he sees; part of the disease; half my day's work to make apologies; wanted to argue with the German Emperor once, and the Portuguese Ambassador; sad case, very; only son of a widowed mother, and considered incurable." Well, the little idiot went on in this way until our Texas friend was persuaded to pocket his bowie-knife, and shake hands; and we had a big drink all round after that.'

'He actually believed that Mr. Seymour was your keeper?'

'My dear girl, he was half drunk, you see; and then I took Seymour's cue, and put on a vacant look. I always tell Seymour that his bit of cheek saved both of our lives. I am pretty strong, you know, but, still, a revolver soon puts an end to a fellow.'

At this time Gerda thought it time to intertere.

'Why do you tell Doris those sort of stories?' she observed reproachfully. 'You have made her look quite pale; she will dream of it to-night, and wake me up by calling out in her sleep.'

'Oh, you are there, are you, fair Saxon?' observed Gerard, quite unabashed at this rebuke.

If he had glanced round at Doris he would have dis-

covered for himself that Gerda was right. Doris was biting her pretty lips to keep back the tears; she was a tender-hearted little soul, and was easily moved. Gerard had been in danger—in real, actual danger. This thought prevented her from perceiving the humour of the story.

'I wish I had known this when Mr. Seymour was here last week,' she remarked, a little shakily. 'I am sorry now that I said I did not care for him much; I would have been ever so much nicer to him.'

'Then you would have made him more conceited than he is already,' retorted Gerda, who had joined them and seated herself by Doris. 'I wonder why little men have always such a good opinion of themselves. With all your faults, Gerard, you are not a bit conceited. Now, Mr. Seymour talks as though his opinion was worth more than most people's.'

'He is a cheeky little beggar,' observed Gerard under his breath; 'but he is a good sort, you know.'

'I dare say you know best,' returned Gerda, rather indifferent, 'as he is your friend, or chum. I think you prefer the latter word; it is very expressive—very: it means so much and so little. For my own part, I did not find him interesting; his conversation was limited. We did not have many points of sympathy, I fancy.'

'Why do you always abuse Gerard's friends?' retorted Doris, quite forgetting that she had also professed indifference to Mr. Seymour. 'They are very nice, only you are so fond of finding fault with people; you want a little world of your own—doesn't she, Gerard?'

'In that case, I am afraid Seymour and I, and the rest of the other fellows, would be cast into limbo,' observed Gerard, with a rueful glance at his cousin's calm face. 'You see, we are not up to the mark in Gerda's eyes. Well, even a worm will turn, and I mean to have my say. Seymour might be better for a few more inches, and he is not what you girls would call a good-looking fellow; but he is an honest, plucky little chap, and he did me a good turn that day, and I don't mind saying that I am grateful to him.'

'You are quite right to stick to him,' returned Gerda magnanimously, and Doris echoed indignantly, 'Of course he is;' and then the luncheon-bell sounded, and Doris jumped up at once, but the others did not follow her.

Gerard was putting the final polish to his skates. Gerda hesitated for a moment, and then rose from her seat, and touched him lightly on his shoulder. Her quick woman's instinct had detected the hurt tone of his voice. With all his easy good-nature, Gerard was not invulnerable; he looked up a little gravely as she touched him.

'I did not mean to be hard on your friend, Gerard; I am afraid you are just a little bit hurt with me because I said Mr. Seymour was conceited.'

'Oh, it was not that,' he returned, for this little apology mollified him at once. 'Seymour lays himself open to that sort of remark, and he certainly has a tolerably good opinion of himself. I only wish sometimes that you cared more for the people and things I care about; it comes into my head sometimes when you talk about other fellows, that you feel a cut above us all, and though it is true, it rather depresses one to hear it.'

'What nonsense!' returned Gerda, with one of her rare sunny smiles. 'I think you ever so much better than I. What can have put this in your head, you foolish fellow? Please ask Mr. Seymour down again, and you shall see how prettily Doris and I will behave to him. Only you do look such a giant beside him. Come, we must not keep Grand and mother waiting. Put down those skates; they really look as bright as silver—oh, they are mine! Thank you so much, Gerard; but I am afraid I shall not want to skate again for a long time.'

'Oh yes, you will! You are not going to funk skating just because of that tumble yesterday. I will take you on next time. I am not going to let another man get the pull of me. I shall not trust you out of my sight;' and with these words Gerard passed his arm through hers, and led her into the dining-room, where the rest of the family were awaiting them.

CHAPTER VII

A TROUBLESOME PATIENT

'We are always the martyrs of our own faults.'
CARMEN SYLVA.

GERDA received an unusual amount of attention during luncheon, which she appropriated with outward meekness and inward compunction; the consciousness of secret revolt made her unwilling to accept over-much kindness. She was accustomed to a great deal of petting from her mother. Mrs. Meredith was prodigal of caresses and soft speeches to the objects of her affection. She was a woman who demanded perpetual assurance and sympathy, and it never entered her head that other and more reticent natures might be willing to dispense with much outward observance. Doris never wounded her with a repulse, but at times she was heard to lament somewhat mournfully over Gerda's indifference.

'It's only her manner,' Doris would say, for she always fired up in her sister's defence. 'People misunderstand Gerda because she is so very quiet, and says so little; but she is really affectionate.'

If Mrs. Meredith were prone to over-much softness and indulgence, Sir Godfrey erred in the opposite direction. He had been brought up in the good old school, as he called it, and held the opinion that an occasional snubbing was wholesome for young people; so he seldom praised. In reality, he was both fond and proud of his young grand-daughters, and thought no girls were to be compared to them; but he rarely permitted himself to indulge in any expression of endearment.

They were good girls—he had not a word to say against them; but even young women were the better for a strong hand over them, and he thanked Heaven that he had too much good sense to spoil them, as that foolish mother of theirs was bent on doing.

Both the girls loved their grandfather, in spite of his strictness and arbitrary ways. They were clear-sighted enough to see through the irritating film of perpetual fault-finding, and to read the old man's heart aright.

'Grand ought to have been a Pharisee, with his everlasting mint and cummin of continual small observances,' Gerda once remarked scornfully. 'He is a stickler for the minor morals. Don't open your eyes, Gerard! Of course you do not know what I mean. Did you not once tell me you hated parables out of the Bible—I mean not in it?—oh, don't laugh! Everyone makes a mistake sometimes. You know you are not quick at grasping an idea.'

'Because I like plain English, that is no reason for calling me an idiot,' retorted Gerard, with a pretended growl—but all the same he suppressed a sigh. Gerda was too clever for him, he thought. He was not more stupid than other fellows; he knew a lot more on certain subjects than she did—how to make the most killing sort of flies, for example, or to play cricket or golf—but in talking she had the pull of him. Some of her speeches went over his head. And then he comforted himself with the assurance that when he was a married man he need stand no nonsense from his wife. 'I shall have to tell her to shut up sometimes, when she bores me too much with her books; but I dare say she will find other things to interest her then;' and Gerard's cheek glowed a little, for he was beginning to regard Sir Godfrey's scheme with a great deal of pleasure; in spite of her nonsense, he had not seen a girl who could hold a candle to her.

But in spite of Sir Godfrey's strictness, there were times when he would relax, and make himself exceedingly pleasant to his womankind. On the present occasion he was in an unusually genial mood. Perhaps the sight of Gerard and his cousin coming into the room in that free-and-easy fashion pleased him, and put him in a good humour.

'I do not see why we should not do it,' he observed mysteriously, as Gerda kissed him. 'The girls ought to

have a treat sometimes;' and then Doris clapped her hands, and she and her mother exchanged glances. 'I'll think over it, and let you know later on,' he continued, still more oracularly; for it was a principle with Sir Godfrey never to decide on any domestic arrangement without due reflection; it somehow added to his importance to take time for deliberation, and to keep people in suspense, waiting for his decision.

Gerda lifted her eyebrows slightly as she took her place. She knew what had been the subject of their conversation. All the houses round were full of guests; it was rather a gay time at Chesterton, and an evening or two before Gerard had had the audacity to propose a dance at the Hall. 'Just a small affair, Uncle Godfrey,' he remarked coolly—'small and early, you know—a sort of Cinderella affair. It would be no trouble at all—the girls and I would manage everything; so don't look so alarmed, Cousin Honoria. Why, we could not muster more than thirty people in these benighted parts; but I would have Seymour and Gilbertson and two or three other fellows down, and put them up somehow.'

'Oh, Gerard, what a delightful idea!' exclaimed both Gerda and Doris at once.

But Sir Godfrey had received the proposition rather coldly.

'I am not quite sure that I like the notion,' he had replied slowly. 'You are wrong, Gerard. It will involve your cousin Honoria in a great deal of trouble—a great deal of trouble—but you young folk never think of that. I can't let the children run away with the idea that it is a settled thing'—Sir Godfrey generally spoke of his grand-daughters as the 'children'; 'I will think over it and let you know, Gerard.'

And that night they had ventured to say no more. But it was evident to Gerda that the subject had been resumed, and Gerard was of the same opinion, for he gave Doris a knowing look as he unfolded his napkin. But, to the aggravation of the three young people, Sir Godfrey's thoughts were diverted at this moment by the excellence of some favourite dish that had just been placed before him, and the next moment his attention was attracted by Gerda's paleness.

'Well, my princess,' he said—for this was his name for

her when he was in a special good humour—'I am afraid you are none the better for your ice-bath yesterday.—She looks palish, Honoria; give her a glass of wine, Gerard.—Yes, you must drink it, my dear, it will do you good. By the way, Lyall was here just now, and left his respects for you.'

'Dr. Lyall!' Gerda changed colour a little as she bent over her plate.

'Yes, dear,' observed Mrs. Meredith, for Sir Godfrey's attention was diverted again for a moment. 'I found him in the library with your grandfather when I came down from your room. He came to inquire after you, and to bring a message from Mrs. Hake. He seemed glad to hear that you were resting. "That is very sensible of her," he said at once, and he hoped you would not venture out to-day, as the wind was very cold. I must say I think it was very polite of him to call, but he said he could do no less after our hospitality yesterday.'

'It was very kind,' murmured Gerda.

'He seems a very pleasant, gentlemanly man. Your grandfather thinks we ought to ask him to dinner.'

But here Sir Godfrey interfered in his pompous way:

'I said I would think about it, Honoria; but that is no reason for you to speak of it as a settled thing; and if we carry out Gerard's absurd plan, another dinner will be out of the question—but there, I have not made up my mind. Gerda, I insist on your finishing that wine; it will put some colour into your cheeks.'

'Dr. Lyall stayed such a long time,' went on Mrs. Meredith hurriedly, with a nervous conviction that she had made a slip. 'You had quite a discussion—had you not, father?'

'Well, well, perhaps we had; and I think I taught him a thing or two. He is certainly a well-bred man, and has plenty of brains. I am afraid it is uphill work with him in his profession—at least, he said as much: did he not, Honoria? He is only a junior partner, and of course he has to make his connection. I wonder now why he was so confidential about himself, for he seems a reserved sort of man—eh, Gerard?'

'Decidedly so, I should say.'

'Oh, it was your fault, father,' interposed Mrs. Meredith eagerly. 'Don't you recollect saying that a doctor ought to be a married man?—and then Dr. Lyall laughed, and said that

it would never do for him to think of a wife yet, as he was not rich enough to afford such a luxury.'

'Ah, that was it, was it? I am sure I have forgotten I said any such thing. But of course I was right. Reynolds never had half the practice he has now until he married; and I recollect now that I cited him as an example.'

'Dr. Lyall took your remark in very good part. Somehow I fancy he is not a marrying man—I do not suppose he is more than three-and-thirty—but there is rather the cut of the old bachelor about him.'

'Pooh! nonsense! What rubbish you women will talk!' returned Sir Godfrey peevishly, for he had finished his luncheon and was getting sleepy. 'I should not mind laying an even bet with anyone that Dr. Lyall will be a married man before two years are out.—There, ring the bell, Gerard; I want Stephens to see to the library fire—it is sure to be half out.' And at this decided hint the family dispersed.

Mrs. Meredith bustled off to the library, to see with her own eyes that the fire was in good condition, and Sir Godfrey's easy-chair put in its right position for the enjoyment of his afternoon nap; but the young people lingered for a few moments round the hall fire.

'Do you think Grand will give in about the dance?' asked Doris anxiously, looking into Gerard's face.

'Give in! Why, it is a dead certainty. You and Gerda may write your invitations if you like.'

'Why, we do not even know the day. We could not do it—could we, Gerda? There is ever so much to settle beforehand.'

'Then it will have to be settled before twenty-four hours are over, as we must have the dance before next Wednesday. Let me see: to-day is Friday—we will fix Tuesday. All right! get the notes written, and I will settle it with Uncle Godfrey this evening.'

'Oh, Gerard, will you really!' and Doris looked at him with admiring gratitude. When Gerard said he would settle a thing, the thing was as good as done.

'Yes, of course I will: and now just hurry up, there's a good child, or we shall lose the best part of the afternoon;' and, as Doris ran off obediently, for she was docile, and a word from Gerard was enough for her, he continued: 'What

are you going to do with yourself, Gerda? Shall I wheel up the big couch for you to take a nap?—for you don't look very fit, you know.'

'No, thank you,' she returned languidly; 'I could not possibly sleep to order; perhaps I shall come out presently and criticise your skating.'

'You must do nothing of the kind,' he returned decidedly; 'but, of course, you are not serious.' And, as Gerda made no response to this, he gave her a nod and a smile, and went off in search of Doris and his skates.

Gerda hardly knew if she were serious or not, but she was in a strange, unsettled frame of mind. The big couch that Gerard had suggested offered her no allurements, and in spite of the bleak, wintry air outside, and the gray sunless atmosphere, she had a restless desire to be out—a morbid fancy to see the spot where she had suffered such deadly terror and peril overmastered her common-sense.

'If I look at it again it will not haunt me to-night,' she thought, with swift, illogical reasoning; and, as usual with Gerda, impulse carried the day. Her mother, Gerard, and Dr. Lyall would all think her extremely foolish, but from certain points of view rashness seems the wisest course; it was worth while undergoing some risk to secure a comfortable night.

Gerda did not at once carry out her intention. She waited until her mother had betaken herself to the morning-room to write letters; then she slipped upstairs and wrapped herself up warmly, and went round to the stable-yard in search of her usual walking companion—a large white fox-terrier, with a black patch over one eye, who was Gerda's special property. No one was disposed to dispute her rights. Waif was by no means a prepossessing animal, and there were plenty of pets at the Hall. Mrs. Meredith had a pug, and Doris a small gray Skye, while Gerard was the owner of a St. Bernard and two knowing little fox-terriers, both of perfect breed and beauty.

Waif was a mongrel; he had begun life on a very humble scale, and past troubles and semi-starvation had given him a gaunt, veteran look. Gerda had seen him once or twice slinking with dejected tail at the heels of his master, a drunken tinker with a heavy hand and an irritable temper,

and had been struck by the pathetic look of misery on the dog's face; perhaps the black patch added to this impression, and the distinct form of the ribs under the rough white coat. The third time she saw him Waif had hurt his foot; he had cut himself with a piece of broken glass, and sat under a hedge whining dismally, while his master cursed him from afar as he mended a kettle. Gerda's soft heart was full of pity for the poor animal, and in her impulsive way she stepped up to the tinker and offered him half a crown for the dog.

'You shall have him for five shillings,' was the surly response; and Gerda took out her purse and paid him on the spot.

'Will he follow me, do you think?' she asked timidly.

'I think he will,' was Joe Atkinson's answer, as, with a favourite oath, he took up a stone, at the sight of which Waif put his tail between his legs, and ran away as fast as his wounded foot allowed him.

Gerda started off in pursuit; the man's fiendish cruelty made her feel sick.

'Here, poor fellow!' she exclaimed, holding out her hand, as she reached him, panting slightly. 'No one shall hurt you. Come home with me; you are my dog now.'

It may be doubted whether Waif understood this speech, but there was one thing plain to his canine sagacity—that this young lady meant to deal kindly by him. He stood regarding her mournfully for a moment; such blandishments were new to his experience. Then his tail wagged feebly, and he suffered her to approach him and pat his rough coat; finally, he responded to her call and limped after her. Once or twice he looked back, as his conscience accused him of infidelity to his hard master; but each time the tinker's hand was uplifted, and when a flint stone skimmed along the path in unpleasant proximity to his hind-legs, Waif made up his mind that he had received his discharge, and was free to enter into another service.

Gerda conveyed him to the stable-yard, and, summoning the groom to her assistance, bathed the wounded foot, and provided the first sufficient meal that Waif had ever enjoyed since his mother left him to the mercies of a cruel world.

'He is a young dog, and when I have brushed him up a

bit he will look a sight better,' remarked Felton; 'but he isn't the sort of a dog for a lady. Perhaps one of us could find him a home.'

Waif was in the delicious enjoyment of a bone at that moment, which he was gnawing as only a hungry dog could gnaw; but, as Felton made this sensible speech, he dropped the bone, and looked up in Gerda's face with mute reproach.

'No, no; I mean to keep him,' she replied hurriedly, in response to this mute appeal; and then, as Waif wagged his tail and returned to his bone she went on: 'He is not handsome, of course, but he looks clever. I am sure, Felton, he understands what we say; please take care of him, and do not let the other dogs worry him, and I will come and see him again.'

From that day Waif was her devoted slave. Gerda never repented her bargain with the tinker, and she bore with calm philosophy the unfavourable criticisms on her favourite. 'Waif cares nothing about his looks, neither do I,' she would say. 'He is as good as gold, and he seems to understand everything I say to him.' Gerda would willingly have had him as an inmate of the Hall, and she pleaded piteously with her grandfather and Gerard to be allowed to bring him in, but neither of them would listen to her.

'Two dogs are enough in a house,' the latter assured her. 'Waif is much better where he is; Felton will look after him, and you can take him for walks.'

'If I ever have a house of my own, I will take care that Waif has a warm corner in it,' Gerda was provoked to answer, and she wondered why Gerard laughed and shrugged his shoulders.

'That depends on the master,' he said to himself as he went off.

Waif had been in his present comfortable quarters for six months now, and though he was still somewhat gaunt, his condition had wonderfully improved, and his coat was almost as glossy as the two terriers, Castor and Pollux. When he saw his mistress enter the yard he uttered a delighted bark and rushed to meet her, and Gerda found it difficult to prevent him from nearly upsetting her with his rough gambols.

And so it was that, somewhat later in the afternoon, Dr

Lyall, who had detached himself from the rest of the skaters to practise the outside edge in comfort, became aware of a tall gray figure standing at the far end of the lake, with a white dog sitting on his haunches beside her. He had keen eyes, and what he saw made him hastily retire and take off his skates, and ten minutes later a quiet and slightly sarcastic voice said in her ear:

'Do you always take such good care of yourself, Miss Meredith?'

Gerda started, and turned round. Her eyes had a dazed, uncertain look in them. Their expression made Dr. Lyall's next speech more than usually brusque.

'Do you think it prudent to stand in this north-east wind for a quarter of an hour at a time?' he continued. 'I am afraid you have small regard for your health. Why, you look half frozen. Please come back with me at once to the Hall. You are making yourself quite ill.'

Dr. Lyall's tone of displeased remonstrance roused Gerda effectually, and she quietly accompanied him. For the first two or three minutes neither of them spoke.

Dr. Lyall, who was a plain, practical man, felt himself annoyed by the girl's perversity. He had recommended warmth and rest, and instead of taking his advice she was standing, looking as pale as death, by the lake-side, and when he had spoken to her she had seemed half dazed. He felt inclined to take no further trouble about her. Evidently she was one of those morbid, hysterical girls whose selfwill is stronger than their common-sense. Of course, he had no right to be angry; but as a medical man——

But here his reflections were interrupted by a soft, unsteady laugh.

'Dr. Lyall, you have only known me for four-and-twenty hours, and this is the second time you have found me doing a foolish thing.'

'I fear that I must endorse that statement, Miss Meredith,' he replied shortly. 'I am a plain man, and I think it best to tell the truth. You are certainly acting very unwisely; you might take a serious chill.'

'I don't think I shall; but I am very cold.' And, indeed, her teeth were chattering as she spoke. 'Of course I deserve what I get, but I should hate to be ill, all the same. Doris

and I are never ill. Dr. Lyall,' laughing timidly up into his grave face, 'please don't think me more foolish than you can help. I want to tell you something. I came out just to look at the place where I went in yesterday. I thought if I saw it again it would not haunt me. It was in my dreams last night, and I thought——' Here she paused with a wistful air, as though she wanted him to understand her.

'Was it necessary to brave the bleak wind for a morbid idea?' he asked. But his tone had grown more gentle. This childlike confession disarmed him.

'It was necessary for my peace of mind,' she returned quietly. 'I must always face a thing at once. It is difficult for a man to understand. We women are such cowards—our imaginations are too much for us. When I was a child I was always like that; however frightened I was, I could not run away from my bogie. I remember once waking up and seeing a dark shape in my room. It looked like an old man in a long cloak. I was sick with terror. In my place any other child would have hidden her head under the bed-clothes; but I sprang out of bed at once and made for the thing. Of course it was only an effect of moonlight on the curtain, so I was rewarded for my effort, and could go to sleep happily.'

'You must have been an extremely plucky little girl.'

'Not at all,' very decidedly. 'It was sheer cowardice. I wanted to know the worst; but I was horribly frightened all the time.'

'I maintain the contrary, Miss Meredith. Do you know a brave soldier will own to fear in his first battle? I remember a man telling me—and he was one of the pluckiest fellows I ever knew—that as he and his detachment were drawn up waiting for the enemy's charge, his only dominant feeling was fear. "I funked the whole thing," was his expression; "it was one of the most unpleasant moments of my life." But when the enemy was on them, and they had their orders to fire, he had no fear. I am afraid I shall shock you when I tell you that my friend owned that he experienced a sort of mad joy and excitement. "It was splendid while it lasted, but it was over in no time. Our fellows drove the rascals back in five minutes." That is how he summed it up. You see, man is a fighting animal, Miss Meredith.'

'It seems so,' was her quiet reply. And then, to her

relief, they reached the Hall, and as Dr. Lyall placed a chair for her beside the blazing fire, she sank into it with a sigh of relief.

'I did not know how cold I was,' she murmured, as she stretched out her hands to the pleasant warmth.

Rogers was arranging the tea-table as they entered, for a large party from the lake was expected. Dr. Lyall coolly helped himself to a cup of tea, and brought it to Gerda.

'You had better drink that,' he said rather authoritatively, for there was a blue tint round the girl's lips that made him uneasy. She took it with a smile, and the next moment they could hear voices and footsteps approaching up the avenue.

CHAPTER VIII

WON BY THE MAJORITY

'What is the use of a fine collar if it strangles you!'
Proverb of Montenegro.

A MINUTE later there was a rush of cold air, the clatter of high-heeled boots on the polished oak floor, and the old hall was filled with a bevy of bright young faces, while their chaperons, Captain and Mrs. Hake, followed more leisurely, with a tall, slim young man in clerical dress, with a round, boyish face and closely-cropped fair head, who was no other than the new curate—Rev. Bertram Allingham. In a moment Gerda was surrounded, and there was a chorus of mingled exclamations, congratulations, and ejaculations of sympathy and horror, which was proof enough to Dr. Lyall that Miss Meredith was a favourite with her young companions.

'I am so sorry, Gerda dear. Mamma and I have hardly slept a wink thinking of the danger you escaped.'

'Why, how did you hear of it, Robina?'

'Oh, Andrews, our odd man, picked it up from your groom, and he told Marvel. You can imagine our feelings! I wanted papa to go off then and there to the Hall; but he had his slippers on, and was too lazy. He said you must be all right, or we should have heard; but I could not sleep for ever so long;' and here Robina, a pretty little brunette, stole a look at Dr. Lyall from under her dark lashes.

'Dear Gerda, I am so thankful!' whispered a tall girl who had not hitherto spoken. This was Frances Hilton, the

Vicar's daughter, and report said that she and the boyish-faced young curate were on the eve of an engagement. She was a quiet, gentle-looking girl, and as she spoke her eyes were full of tears.

'My congratulations were all given last night,' exclaimed Mrs. Hake in her loud, cheerful voice, as she pressed through the group of girls. 'Somebody told me that you had been seen flitting round the lake like a gray ghost, and as you have your hat on, I am afraid it is true. You look shockingly, Gerda—but I expect it is all your fault. I would not be in your mother's shoes for anything; I am sure you girls lead her a life.—Is that cup of tea for me, Mr. Allingham? No—no sugar, thank you. I am getting too stout, my husband says, and sugar is so fattening.—Now, Doris, what is this that a little bird has just told me about a Cinderella dance at the Hall? Well, if you must know, Mr. Hamlyn gave me a hint of it.'

'It was in strict confidence, Mrs. Hake,' observed Gerard, who had overheard this, and was passing with a plate of cake. 'Don't let Cousin Honoria hear you.'

'She has heard us already—she is shaking her head at us. Look, girls, I have a grand idea! Let us all go and beard Sir Godfrey in his library. He will not be able to resist us. I will make a speech, and you shall all back me up. Come, Edith, Constance, Doris, Robina—Gerda, you have an invalid's privilege, but we will not dispense with Frances—Mr. Allingham, if you can spare Miss Hilton!'—and Frances rose at once with a blush. 'Pamela, why are you keeping your seat?'

But that vivacious young lady shook her head.

'I am not coming, Gertrude, thank you. I want the dance as badly as any of you, but I know my place as a stranger. Alick agrees with me—don't you, Alick? The deputation will be complete without me.'

Dr. Lyall nodded. The little scene amused him, and he was glad to see that Gerda had thrown off her lassitude, and looked pleased and interested. As Mrs. Hake swept the chattering, laughing girls before her out of the room, he left his place and joined the three gentlemen at the tea-table. To his surprise, they were quietly and seriously discussing the dance.

'I shall have to look on, you know; you must not count on me,' observed Mr. Allingham, in a regretful tone. 'The Vicar does not approve of his curates dancing.'

'Nonsense, my dear fellow! A small affair like this: half a dozen couples—well, a dozen, then,' as the curate looked mildly surprised at this reckoning. 'Besides, we will not split on you.'

And then Captain Hake took up the argument.

'Dancing is the finest exercise in the world, after tennis and that sort of thing. All the medical faculty recommend it—eh, Lyall?'—with a playful poke in the ribs. 'You should not be so strait-laced, Allingham. We look for liberality and breadth of opinion from a Merton man. It would not be pleasant to your feelings to see Miss Augusta or Miss Frances sitting in the corner for want of a partner. Come, now, there's an appeal to your chivalry!' and Bertram Allingham confessed that, under those circumstances, he might be inclined to hesitate.

Meanwhile, Pamela had drawn her chair to the edge of the big bearskin rug, and had plunged into a conversation in her usual abrupt fashion. She was looking very pretty, Gerda thought; the dark ruby dress and hat exactly suited her dark complexion, and the exercise had brightened her eyes and heightened her colour.

'I saw you down by the lake an hour ago, Miss Meredith, and I was not a bit surprised when Alick took off his skates to go to you. He would disapprove of the whole thing—sentiment and all. He ordered you home at once, did he not? That was Alick all over.'

'He certainly told me that it was unwise to stand still so long—the wind was so dreadfully cold. I am afraid he thought me very silly.'

'Of course he did. Alick thinks most women are born without common-sense; he has not a grain of sympathy for what he calls false sentiment. But you and I think differently. In your place I should have done just the same; it is not every day that one lives through such a moment as that. It must be delicious to go through it all again—on the same spot, too.'

Gerda stared at her. Was the girl serious, or was she secretly making fun of her? She did not quite like Pamela's tone—it was rather too sarcastic.

'You quite misunderstand my motives,' she began rather stiffly.

But Pamela checked her with a light laugh:

'My dear Miss Meredith, I should never misunderstand you. I grasped the whole situation last night. We are alike in one thing, we are both intense; you are always so terribly in earnest, are you not?'

'Not more than other people.'

'Oh dear yes! How can you make such a mistake! Now, I am only earnest by fits and starts, but we are both intense, for all that. I could prove it to you in ten minutes, but I won't, for fear of boring you. Alick is not a bit intense; he is matter-of-fact and practical—that is why we quarrel sometimes.'

'I hope you are not serious!'

'I am perfectly so, I assure you. Alick is terribly damping sometimes; I get hobbies, and then he tries to crush me with some common-sense remark, as he calls it; then I flare up, and then, sometimes, I won't speak to him for the rest of the day.'

'I am inclined to pity Dr. Lyall.'

'I expected you to say that. Hester pities him, too; she always takes his part.'

'May I ask who Hester may be?'

'Well, as you ask so very prettily, I don't mind telling you. Hester is my sister; she is older than I. A good many years ago she made an unfortunate marriage—at least, Alick says so—but I own I am very fond of my brother-in-law; he is a cousin of Mr. Vincent's—my *fiancé*, I mean,' as Gerda looked at her in a questioning manner. 'I suppose Gertrude told you I am engaged; she tells everybody. I never knew a woman who advocates matrimony so strongly; but I am not quite sure that I agree with her.'

'I thought you just told me you were engaged,' returned Gerda, rather bewildered by this last remark.

'So I am, and so I have been for the last three years; but I am just as likely to remain Pamela Lyall to the end of the chapter. I dare say you think my speech a little enigmatical: but, in this vexatious world, money is a great power—and, unfortunately, neither the Vincents nor the Lyalls have much of it. Unhappily, there is this difference between the cousins: Derrick would work hard if he could only get work to do

but he has not had a single brief yet; and Julius, my brother-in-law, hates work, and does as little as he possibly can.'

'Is your brother-in-law a lawyer, too?'

'No, he is an artist—and not a very good artist, either; at least, people will not buy his pictures. Alick says he does not take pains to find out what will please the public taste. He just works in a groove; now and then he wakes up and paints a pot-boiler, as Hester calls it.'

'It sounds rather serious; it is to be hoped they have no children.'

'My dear Miss Meredith, you have a great deal to learn yet. Your question proves ignorance of the world; poor people always have children—have you never remarked that? They have two boys and a girl—the girl is a cripple, I am sorry to say.'

'You must be very sorry for your sister?'

'So I am—and I am sorry for Julius, too, he's such a good-looking fellow; and I do not believe that it is his fault as much as people say. There must be something defective in his moral nature. I am aware that I am playing the casuist, and that my remark touches on one of those nice and puzzling questions in what Alick terms the science of ethics; but I hold the opinion that certain human beings, my brother-in-law among them, are less accountable, or I should say more irresponsible, than other people. As long as Julius lives he will never be a full-grown man.'

'Is it not a pity that your sister married him?'

'My dear creature! Hester fulfilled her destiny, as you and I will fulfil ours. The Parcæ, commonly known as the Fates, do most of the spinning of the human web. If Hester had not married Julius, she would not have been Hester. That is how I put it.'

'You seem to be a fatalist.'

'I hardly know what I am. I am a poor little girl who wants to know everything—and knows nothing. Hush! I hear voices—what a procession!' and Pamela broke off her odd disjointed talk and began to laugh as Sir Godfrey entered the hall, with Mrs. Hake on his arm and Robina Stewart leading him by the hand, the other girls following him.

'Won by the majority, I see,' said Captain Hake, rubbing his hands.

'I gave in at once,' returned Sir Godfrey, with an old-fashioned bow to the company; 'when youth, beauty, and eloquence combine to make a fool of an old man,' and here there was a twinkle in his eye, 'there is no resistance possible.'

'Of course not. We "came, saw, and conquered"—did we not, Sir Godfrey?' cried Robina roguishly, for she was an old favourite, and had often begged favours for Gerda and Doris when they were little girls, and she was used to making saucy little speeches. 'It is all right, Gerda. There is to be a Cinderella dance, and the day is to be fixed before we go. Sir Godfrey has behaved like an angel.'

'Sir Godfrey is going to open the ball with me, Lionel,' and Mrs. Hake looked at her husband. 'Now, Mr. Hamlyn, as it is an open secret, we will resolve ourselves into a committee of ways and means—we are all friends here. Pamela, my dear, you may go away—no one wants you. Mrs. Meredith, your father has bespoken my help; he wishes me to advise you on one or two points, especially——' Here Mrs. Hake lowered her voice as she seated herself beside Mrs. Meredith, and Gerda, in her distant corner, heard no more.

'Are you fond of dancing, Miss Meredith?' asked Dr. Lyall, coming up to her at this moment.

'Oh yes; all girls like dancing—and most men too: my cousin Gerard is devoted to it. I hope you like it too?'

'Well, no—not especially, I mean'—as Gerda looked a little disappointed. 'I don't mind looking on—a dance is always a pretty sight—but I should be wrong if I called myself a dancing man.'

'Then I am afraid you will be bored.'

'Oh no!' and Dr. Lyall's smile was a pleasant one; 'I am seldom bored, and I dare say I shall do my duty like a man. Are we to dance in this fine old hall on Wednesday night?'

And as Gerda nodded, Gerard came up to them with a very bright face.

'It is all settled, Gerda. Uncle Godfrey is like wax in Mrs. Hake's hands. She has got leave to bring all her nieces—even the red-haired Miss Nancy, whom Uncle Godfrey abhors; and I am to fill all the spare rooms with my

special chums. I'll write to Seymour and Gilbertson and Drury at once.'

'I am so glad, Gerard! Doris will be so pleased—and it will be her first dance, too.'

'So it will!'—with evident surprise. 'I never thought of that. In that case you won't mind my asking her for the first dance. I should like to pay her that little attention, she is such a dear little soul. Mind you keep three valses for me—three!—I will not let you off with less.'

Gerard's tone was a trifle dictatorial, and he enforced his speech with a look that made Gerda turn to Dr. Lyall hastily and say:

'I suppose you can waltz?'

'Well, I can get round the room somehow; but I do not suppose my partner is particularly happy. Ah, I see Mrs. Hake is about to take her leave, so I may as well say good-bye; but I wish you would promise one thing before I go;' and as Gerda looked up at him with a soft, questioning smile; 'that you will take more care of yourself, and not go near the lake to-morrow;' and as she assented to this he dropped her hand a little hurriedly.

"'Good-bye,' exclaimed Pamela, with a friendly look. 'We were interrupted in our nice talk, and must finish it another time. Are you waiting for me, Alick? Very well, I will come;' and Pamela tripped after him into the darkness outside.

'I like that girl, after all,' she said, as she took her brother's arm—a sisterly attention with which he would willingly have dispensed, for he wanted a chat with his friend Hake, and the offer of a cigarette from that obliging person. 'I was not quite sure of her last night; I thought that she was just a little bit affected; but I have found out my mistake. She is absolutely genuine.'

'Are you not a little premature in your criticism? You have only talked to Miss Meredith for two consecutive half-hours, and there you are, as usual, heaping a new acquaintance with every possible and impossible virtue.'

'If you are going to be disagreeable and sarcastic, Alick, I shall leave off talking. Don't you know there are people whom you seem to know thoroughly in an hour, while there are other people with whom you do not get intimate during

a whole lifetime? This afternoon I discovered that Miss Meredith and I were in touch—that we thought alike on many points.'

'I rather wonder at that,' returned her brother ironically, for he did not believe this statement in the least. As far as he could judge during their very limited acquaintance, he thought no two girls could be more dissimilar than Pamela and Gerda Meredith.

'But she is terribly delicate,' went on Pamela, disregarding the sneer in Alick's tone. 'I should not like anyone in whom I was interested to take a fancy to her. He would have a sickly wife.'

'Nonsense!' was the blunt reply. 'She only looks ill from the chill and fright. Many people are naturally without much colour. I expect Miss Meredith is as strong as most women.'

'Oh, do you think so?' returned Pamela, who never ventured to contradict her brother on matters of health. 'Well, I am very glad to hear it. Let me see, someone was telling me last night—who could it be?—not Gertrude; no, it was Miss Dalton: the younger one, Augusta—yes, Augusta Dalton told me that Sir Godfrey—what an old beau he is, Alick!—is bent on making up a match between his nephew and Miss Meredith.'

Dr. Lyall gave a slight imperceptible start.

'Did you slip, Alick? Perhaps you have got some ice under your heel. Dear, dear, how tired I am! and you walk so dreadfully fast! Do you want to overtake the others?'

'No; it is only this beastly wind;' for Dr. Lyall was not in the best of tempers.

'Oh, I do not mind it in the least! Well, I am sure, if Augusta Dalton be correct, Miss Meredith is a lucky girl. Mr. Hamlyn is his uncle's heir; and then he is such a handsome fellow, and so pleasant and good-natured! I am sure he spent more than half an hour trying to teach that stupid little Robina Stewart the outside edge. What a little flirt she is! She was trying to fascinate him all the time—and then he helped that plain Miss Robins. He did not get a bit of fun himself.'

Dr. Lyall did not answer. Perhaps the subject did not interest him. Pamela always chattered away, whether he

listened to her or not. What a gossip she was, to be sure! and he hated gossip. But later on that evening he caught himself wondering if she had spoken the truth. The story was a probable one; propinquity and convenience had a great deal to do with many marriages.

'I suppose it is true,' he said to himself, when he found himself alone. 'Not that it matters to me whether it is so or not.' And then he pulled off his boots and fell into a reverie.

When the guests had departed, Gerda still sat by the fire wrapped in her furs. She was in a dreamy, quiescent mood. A sense of warmth, rest, and well-being stole over her. This was the hour she loved, only Rogers had lighted the lamps and spoiled the twilight.

Sir Godfrey was in his high-backed chair, with his pince-nez comfortably fixed on his nose, and his paper in his hand; but he was not reading. Gerard had been teasing Doris, a favourite employment with him, and now he had persuaded her to practise the new valse step with him, and Mrs. Meredith was playing by ear in the dark drawing-room; but, though the pedal was down, only a few faint sounds reached them.

'Never mind, I'll whistle the accompaniment, and you will be sure to keep time,' observed Gerard, making light of this difficulty.

Gerda watched the slowly revolving figures; then she started as her grandfather touched her. He regarded her benignly as he spoke.

'Gerard and Doris seem excellent friends, do they not?

'Oh yes,' she answered cordially; 'Gerard is always so good to her, and she is very fond of him. How well she dances! but, then, Gerard is such a nice partner. Does it not seem strange, Grand, that this will be Doris's first dance, and she is eighteen?'

'Humph! I do not see anything strange,' in rather a ruffled tone, 'about that,' for this was touching on a secretly sore point. 'Doris is a mere child still, and I do not hold with putting young girls forward. I told Hake so when he spoke to me.'

'Did Captain Hake talk to you about Doris?'

'It was not Doris specially, but he had the impertinence to tell me once that he thought it a great pity that I did not

give my grand-daughters the advantage of a London season. As though my private affairs were any business of his! But Hake is always putting in his oar about one thing or another. I believe that clever wife of his is at the bottom of all the mischief.'

'But, Grand,' opening her eyes a little widely, 'it would be such an expense, a London season.'

'I suppose I could afford it if I chose,' in a dignified voice; 'but I have no wish to see you and Doris changed into fashionable young women. Gerard and I talked it over once, and to my surprise he agreed with me. He owned it would be great fun, but that it would spoil you for a country life. He said some of the men were such asses, and that he thought on the whole it would be a mistake—that it would only make you both discontented.'

'I think it was ridiculous of Gerard to say that. Doris and I ought to be presented;' and Gerda drew up her long neck and looked at her grandfather a little defiantly. Now and then she would give herself these little airs with him, but for once he forbore to snub her.

'Oh, that is your opinion, is it, my princess?'—still in high good humour—'but I am afraid you must wait for that until you are married. Don't you think that it is high time you were engaged, Gerda?' in rather a meaning tone. 'Why, you are one-and-twenty—your mother was married long before that. You see, my dear'—in an affectionate tone—'I am not a rich man, and I am trying to improve the property for Gerard. Gerard will be far better off than I am. Nothing would please me better than to see you and Doris well married; but of course it is your turn first. Don't you think it about time to make up your mind? In that case I should not be surprised if a house in town might not be forthcoming for at least one season, and then Doris could come out under your wing. Your mother and I often talk of that. There are the Hamlyn jewels, you know; any bride might be proud of them——'

But Gerda could bear no more. Sir Godfrey had often dropped hints in her presence. There had been a word here and a word there that had pierced her consciousness, but he had never spoken so plainly. What! she was to be bribed to marry Gerard! A house in town, Doris's advantage, the

Hamlyn diamonds, were to be offered to her as baits! Oh, what would Gerard say? Would not his simple manly honesty revolt at such bribes? She rose hurriedly.

'Rogers is just going to sound the gong. I must go now, please, or I shall not be ready for dinner.'

Gerda did not wait for permission. She fled past the two dancers upstairs and into her own room.

'Grandfather is too bad, too bad!' she said to herself with girlish indignation. 'He is growing old—indeed, he is in his dotage. Am I to be bought with a house in town? It is absurd—monstrous—inconceivable! But Gerard is no party to such a scheme. He would hate all this talk as much as I do.'

And Gerda dressed herself disconsolately, and there was a cloud on her young brow; the old difficulties had beset her again, and robbed her of her peace.

CHAPTER IX

ON THE CHILVERTON ROAD

'When in conversing with anyone you see that he is keeping something back, it seems as though you were feeling for his hands across a wall.'—CARMEN SYLVA.

THE dance at the Hall was regarded as a public event in Chesterton, and when, the next day, the frost suddenly showed signs of breaking up, there were fewer lamentations than usual on the part of the young folk, for, as Doris remarked triumphantly, it would not be quite useless now to send invitations to Stanix Park and Blacklea, as a five-mile drive would not be utterly impossible.

'Gerard says that he should not be surprised if we get about sixteen couples,' she observed to Gerda the following evening; 'and if we count the married people, we shall muster over forty;' and Doris's cheeks were pink with excitement as she spoke.

Gerda laid down her book, and regarded her sister with a sort of pitying amusement. Was Doris only three years younger than herself? Could it be only three years since her own eyes had brightened, and her heart palpitated at the idea of her first dance? What a different affair that had been! Sixteen couples, indeed! Why, it had been a ball at Queen's Gate, and the room had been full of officers. She remembered how their spurs had torn the ladies' dresses; Bertie Longhurst, the heir of Stanix Park, had just come of age, and his aunt, Lady Paget, had celebrated the event by a ball. It was the only glimpse of London gaiety Gerda had

ever had, and she recalled even now the brief intoxication, the dreamy bewilderment, as her first partner, a young lieutenant in the hussars, whirled her over the polished floor to the delicious strains of one of Strauss' valses.

'Well, Gerda,' and Doris stamped her foot in pretended impatience, 'why are you smiling in that disdainful way, instead of answering me? I believe your wits are wool-gathering again.'

'I was reading the "Thoughts of a Queen,"' returned Gerda calmly. She rather loved to tease Doris by affecting a stoicism she did not feel. Nothing provoked Doris more than seeing Gerda put on elder-sisterly airs. 'She was such a wise young queen, Dorrie,' she continued, 'as wise as the Queen of Sheba after she had heard the wisdom of Solomon. Just listen to this racy little bit:

'"Imagination is a gay companion, who frolics along the road and tells us tales. Reality is an old woman, who talks of nothing but herself, and, always fatigued, wants to be carried."'

'What stupid stuff!' returned Doris, rather crossly, for she was in no mood for philosophical reflections. 'Why should Reality be an old woman? As though young people could not be real too! As for Imagination, you are ever so much more imaginative than I—Gerard said so once. Don't you recollect his calling us Poetry and Prose, and you were affronted because he said afterwards that he hated poetry?'

Gerda laughed; the little episode had escaped her memory, but she recalled it now. How red Gerard had got after uttering that unlucky speech, and how abject had been his apology, 'I did not mean it, you know, not really!'

'Prose is the best for everyday life,' she had returned quietly; 'you are quite right, Gerard. I do not mind you telling the truth in the least. Doris is far nicer than I am; she is not always walking about with her head in the clouds.' But to this injudicious speech Gerard made no reply.

'Never mind, Doris; I will not tease you any more. What were you saying about sixteen couples? I hope you are not counting either Dr. Lyall or Mr. Allingham, for they will not dance.'

'Indeed they will!' replied Doris excitedly. 'Gerard says he will insist on every man doing his duty. What are

we to do about dresses, Gerda? I suppose I must wear my white silk; I have nothing else;' and then the two girls began gravely discussing the contents of their wardrobe.

This conversation had taken place on Saturday evening; all the invitations had been sent out, and Gerard had telegraphed to several choice spirits who were sojourning in various parts of the country. The band, too, a cornet and pianist from the neighbouring town, had been bespoken, and an extensive order to the confectioner had been written by Mrs. Meredith, who was already nearly worn out by the minute and fussy orders that Sir Godfrey was giving every hour of the day.

Sir Godfrey felt himself to be a public benefactor. During the next few days the Master of Chesterton Hall was very much to the fore; nothing must be done without his surveillance; he must give every order, superintend every arrangement—even the polishing of the oak floor, and the decoration and lighting of the old hall, could not be carried out without his constant supervision. When Mrs. Hake and Pamela called to offer their assistance, the afternoon before the dance, they found Sir Godfrey standing before the fireplace with his pince-nez in his hand, directing Rogers and a bevy of maids, while Mrs. Meredith stood at his elbow putting in a timid word now and then, and looking excessively tired.

'Take care how you move that oak cabinet, Rogers; it is just the least bit rickety on one foot.—Thank you, Gerard,' as that young man went to Rogers' help.—'Hannah, what are you doing with that china?—My dear,' turning to his daughter, 'you know I never allow the maids to touch the Sèvres china; Hannah has an awkward knack of letting things slip through her fingers. Where are the girls? It is their business.—Hannah, I insist on your not touching the contents of that cabinet! My grand-daughters will be here directly.—Emma, tell the young ladies that I wish them to come at once.—Ah, Mrs. Hake, you find us busy—extremely busy—my daughter and I are superintending things. Servants are like children; they cannot be trusted out of one's sight. Rogers has no head.—Sit down, ladies.—Honoria, my love, will you take Mrs. Hake to the drawing-room? There is some sort of fire there, I believe, and Gerard and I will finish here.'

'Do let us stop and help,' entreated Mrs. Hake, taking no notice of this hint to withdraw. 'How admirably you have managed the lighting, Mr. Hamlyn! Those sconces and the evergreens look so well.—Dear me, Sir Godfrey, you might be in the habit of giving dances every fortnight, you seem to understand the whole thing so well!'

'I believe we were indebted to Gerard for most of the suggestions,' returned Sir Godfrey graciously. Mrs. Hake knew how to manage him exactly: a word of praise, a smile and a glance, and he became at once lamb-like. 'We are raw recruits down here, Mrs. Hake; we want drilling; and Gerard is good enough to perform that office.—An eighth of an inch more to the right, Gerard'—with a wave of his hand—'just so—thank you. Now for the piano!—Doris, where is your sister? I want you to move the china—this is your department, I believe; it was quite against rules for Hannah to touch it—you and Gerda must do it.'

'Gerda has gone out for a walk, Grand,' returned Doris, in rather a frightened tone. 'She was tired of all the bustle, and said it made her head ache. I persuaded her to go. I can do the china very well alone.'

'Nonsense! when we are here to help you,' returned Mrs. Hake vigorously, for a cloud had gathered on Sir Godfrey's brow.

'It is very odd that Gerda has a headache whenever she is required to make herself useful,' he began; but Gerard, as usual, undertook the defence of the absent.

'Gerda has not seemed the thing since that confounded ice accident,' he observed, strolling across the hall with his hands in his pockets. 'We shall have you knocked up, too, Uncle Godfrey, if you stand about any longer. Go into the drawing-room and get some tea.—Mrs. Hake, please take him away—he never refuses a lady;' and Sir Godfrey at last allowed himself to be persuaded.—'We shall get on twice as fast without him,' Gerard observed confidentially to Pamela. 'The dear old boy fusses himself far too much.—Hannah, you need not go away; you can help Miss Doris. I am sure you will take care not to break things—and we really want hands.'

'Will mine do?' asked Pamela, in much humility, spreading out a pair of pretty little hands as she spoke. 'Will

Mr. Hamlyn deign to accept my poor services?' and she dropped him a little curtsey.

'All right; Doris will find you something to do, Miss Lyall,' he returned, good-humouredly, and he went off in search of Rogers. He was not quite sure he admired Miss Lyall; she was very bright and piquante, but just a little too sharp for his taste; and then he wondered for the third time why Gerda should be prowling about the cold wet roads in the twilight. If he were not so busy he would go after her; he hated girls wandering about after dark.

He need not have concerned himself about her safety, for at that moment she was walking through the village with Dr. Lyall. He had come out of the gate as she was passing Braeside, and Waif had foolishly barked at him, thereby attracting his attention.

Gerda had seen Dr. Lyall each day; whether by accident or design, they had met continually. On Sunday he and Captain Hake had walked home with them from church, and had been persuaded by Sir Godfrey to stay to luncheon. They had spent the remainder of the afternoon dawdling over the fire in pleasant desultory conversation; Dr. Lyall had been drawn into a discussion on books, and Gerda found that he knew most of her favourite authors.

'I am rather an omnivorous reader,' he confessed. 'I read everything that comes to hand; but I suppose I have my tastes, like other people;' and after a little judicious pressing on Gerda's part, he had named two or three books that had long been her favourites.

'Dr. Lyall is very intelligent,' she had remarked to her sister after the two gentlemen had taken their leave. 'It is a little difficult to get at his opinions, as he is naturally reserved, but I can see that he thinks deeply on some subjects.'

'I am glad you were pleased,' replied Doris dryly; 'but I cannot say that I found the conversation interesting, I liked Gerard's and Captain Hake's much better. I am never out of my depth with them.'

Gerda was not sorry when she saw Dr. Lyall's brisk, alert figure come out of Braeside; she looked upon him now as quite an old acquaintance. Dr. Lyall on his part looked excessively pleased.

'You have chosen a miserable afternoon for a walk,' he said, with an approving glance, notwithstanding, at her neat, trim appearance and thick boots. 'Do you always take a constitutional in all weathers?'

'I believe so; it is no use staying indoors, unless it rains very heavily. But I confess it is not a pleasant afternoon.'

'You are putting it mildly,' he returned, as he suited his pace to hers; 'most people would use a stronger epithet, and I should not blame them'—looking before him at the half-melted slush of the road, and the dank, wet vegetation. It was a cold thaw, and the damp chill seemed to creep to his bones. 'We must walk fast if we are to keep warm,' he finished.

'Do not let me take you out of your way,' observed Gerda, a little nervously. 'I am quite used to walking alone. There was such a noise and bustle in the house that I was glad to escape; besides, my head ached.'

'I am afraid you sat up reading too late last night. Ah, I see you are startled at my singular penetration; but I am right for once, am I not? No, you are not taking me out of my way, for the sole reason that I have no way. I had just come out for a prowl. If you do not object to my companionship, I should like to accompany you. I want to point out to you seriously the error of your ways. Do you know that you are very sensitive and excitable, and that you need anodynes, not stimulants. Now, though I am no magician, I will wager anything you like that you had no beauty sleep last night.'

'I was certainly not in bed until one o'clock,' replied Gerda, in rather a guilty tone; 'but I assure you that I was not reading.'

'You were thinking, then?'

Gerda nodded.

Dr. Lyall threw up his head in rather an argumentative manner. Miss Meredith might be interesting and attractive, and in his opinion she was both; but she was not exempt from the weaknesses of her sex.

'I suppose you were thinking about the dance?'—and there was latent disdain in his tone. 'That is why I say you are excitable. A well-balanced mind——' But she interrupted him indignantly.

'The dance! Do you think I am a child? What an opinion you must have of me! As though the prospect of a pleasant evening would deprive me of sleep! You are wrong for once, Dr. Lyall,' walking on faster than ever, and her words tripping each other up, while he listened with an amused smile. 'I was thinking of far different things, of a much graver subject—I was wondering why so little light came to one when one was perplexed and could see no way out of the maze. After all, it is better to be a man. Men are so free; they can do what they like; no one ventures to control their actions; but when one is only a girl, people think they have a right to interfere—they give her advice, they thwart, and guide, and push her in every direction except where she wishes to go. I know people call this the emancipated age; but I do not seem to see it myself.'

'Does this deluge of strong indignation, that has almost swamped me, mean personal and grievous experience, or are you merely standing up in generous championship for the rights of your sex?'

'I see you are laughing at me, Dr. Lyall,' calming down under that cool, satirical tone; 'but I assure you that it is no matter for amusement. I am beginning to think women have a great deal to bear.'

'I will agree with you for once—suppose I give you that point; but we must not go too fast. You want to prove to me that the young women of the present age are still shackled, that their friends and relatives are often dictatorial and interfering. Perhaps in individual cases this may be so; but surely the girl is a free agent. There is no need for her to follow advice implicitly. After all, I do not think we need pity them. English girls are remarkably robust.'

'It is impossible for you to understand,' returned Gerda, with a sort of despair in her voice, which gave Dr. Lyall a painful sensation. 'You are not a woman; you do not comprehend the situation in the least.'

'Perhaps if you were a little more explicit,' he began gravely, and there was now no latent sarcasm in his manner. After all, these vague remarks might point to some real perplexity; she might be in difficulty herself; she might even need a friend.

'That is exactly what I cannot be,' she replied quickly, and then she hesitated.

Why was she so anxious to know this man's opinion? A week ago he had been a stranger to her, and even now she knew little about him; but there was something about Dr. Lyall, a certain quiet strength and self-reliance, that made people willing to trust him. No man had ever had more secrets confided to him—women especially told him their troubles—for one thing he was never afraid of speaking the truth to them.

Gerda was vaguely sensible of all this. Dr. Lyall was different from most men; he was less selfish and less self-engrossed. In his busy life he had still leisure to interest himself in other people. Could she not obtain his unprejudiced opinion in some roundabout way? It would be impossible to speak plainly; but she might draw an imaginary case.

'Suppose, for the sake of argument,' she began, 'that a girl found herself in a difficult position; that all her friends had agreed to put a pressure on her to do a certain thing, and that to please them and make them happy she must do it or else bring herself into trouble with them. Of course,' breaking off hastily, 'I am only quoting this as an example to illustrate my theory—that girls are too much coerced.'

'Oh, of course I understand that;' but Dr. Lyall gave his companion a quick glance as he said this. 'May I venture to ask if this supposititious young lady were unwilling to fall in with her friends' views?'

'We will say she was not willing—or, perhaps, to render it a little more complex, we will put it that she was hardly sure in her own mind whether she wished it or not. Anyhow, this free agent, as you call her, would be subjected to daily and hourly pressure.'

'I begin to see what you mean,' he returned slowly, as though he were pondering every word. 'If there were many similar cases you would be certainly right in saying men have the best of it. But, Miss Meredith, after all, it is perfectly simple for women as well as for men—there can be but one right and wrong; surely we have not one code for the male and another for the female sex.'

'Certainly not.'

'This fictitious young lady may have a great deal to bear from her friends' importunity—I will not deny that—but no coercion, no well-meant advice, ought to prevail with her against her conscience. If my sister were to come and ask me: "Shall I do this or that thing?—take care how you answer me, for it will involve the happiness or unhappiness of my life"—I would not be so presumptuous as to answer her. Why should I direct another human being's life? I might, indeed, offer her advice, I might point out the pitfalls that would lie in her way; but the decision would rest with her. Follow your conscience, do what you think would be right and true, and leave the results.'

'Thank you!' For the moment Gerda felt she could say no more; but, to her surprise, Dr. Lyall went on talking:

'It is very strange that we should have had this argument, for I was once placed myself in this painful position. Perhaps you do not know that I have another sister beside Pamela?'

'Miss Lyall told me about her—she is married.'

'Yes; that is the unfortunate part of it. She has married the wrong man. But she would not allow that he was anything but the right one—though we both tried, Pamela and I, to prove to her her mistake. Hester is two years older than I am, and a very clever woman. Her husband ought to have been superior to herself, or at least her equal—it was degrading her intellect to marry Julius Vincent.'

'What was wrong with him?'

'What is right with him? you might say. Oh, you need not be shocked—my brother-in-law has no vices: he is simply an idle, an irresponsible being, who has not arrived at his full stature.'

'And yet your sister loved him?'

'I suppose so. Julius contrived to win her affections; ladies call him fascinating. Well, Miss Meredith, now for my difficulty: my sister came to me and said, in so many words, "I love this man; I never intend to marry anyone else. I would rather be unhappy with him than live without him: if I do not become his wife my life will be spoilt; but I will not marry him if you forbid me to do so."'

'Did she really say that?'

'She did—and, what is more, she would have abided by

her words: my sister is a conscientious woman. She had heard all my arguments before; there was no use in my repeating them. I had told her before that if she married Julius Vincent she would be a needy woman all her life; but when she put it to me like this, when she insisted on making me, her brother, the arbitrator of her fate, I refused to speak. I would not forbid her to marry him.'

'I think you were right—and, in any case, she knew your opinion.'

'She knew it. And three weeks afterwards she married him, and my words have come true. Julius does not work; he paints bad pictures, and wastes his time and strength. Hester keeps a day-school, that she and her children may have bread enough to eat and to keep their heads out of debt. Why do I tell you this painful story, Miss Meredith? Is it not to illustrate my theory—as you have yours—that we must do what we think right, even if it give us pain and leaves results. Forgive me for preaching such a sermon,' with a short laugh, 'but you have brought it on yourself.'

'I have nothing to forgive; on the contrary, I am extremely obliged to you. Dr. Lyall!'—suddenly—'I have no idea where we are, and it is growing dark.'

'I was about to observe the same thing. We are on the highroad to Chilverton, and we have turned once: the sign-post told me as much five minutes ago.'

'Have we passed the sign-post!' in a relieved tone. 'Then we have only to turn down Bramble Lane, as it is called, and there is a short-cut that will bring us to the Hall in ten minutes.'

'Then by all means let us take it, before it gets too dark to see our way—for it is quite time for you to be home. This is the result of getting too deeply into argument. I had not the slightest intention of giving you more than ten minutes of my company. I think I must apologize to Mrs. Meredith. Shall I?'

Gerda made no objection, and they both quickened their steps, and in a few more minutes they were at their destination.

Mrs. Meredith received the doctor's excuses very graciously Gerda had a bad habit, she said, of going out between lights.

In the village it did not matter, everyone knew them; but the roads were certainly very lonely. She must forbid such walks in the future; her girls were too fearless and independent. She was much obliged to Dr. Lyall for his escort, and she could not see that he was to blame for so kindly taking care of her daughter.

Dr. Lyall was exonerated, but Gerda herself did not escape scot-free. Her mother followed her to her room.

'This must never happen again, Gerda,' she said with rather a grave face. 'You are too incautious, my dear. I am sure Gerard would object to you walking with Dr. Lyall. Of course,' as Gerda looked vexed at this allusion to her cousin, 'I see exactly how it happened. He was coming out of Braeside, and, as he was walking in the same direction, he joined you.'

'Yes, and then we got into an argument, and walked a little too far.'

'Just so. Well, for this once I will excuse it; but, as I said before, it must never occur again. For the future you must take your walks earlier, and there is no need for you to go alone either. Doris or I can accompany you. You are too independent, Gerda, and, after all, you are only a very young lady.'

'Very well, mother; I will be more careful for the future;' and Gerda sealed this promise with a penitent kiss.

Mrs. Meredith so seldom asserted her authority, that this unusual and dignified remonstrance had its desired effect, and nothing would have induced Gerda to allow Dr. Lyall to walk many yards with her again along the Chilverton roads.

CHAPTER X

AN INNOCENT MATCHMAKER

True friendship can afford true knowledge. It does not depend on darkness or ignorance.'—THOREAU.

GERDA had received her mother's rebuke very sweetly, but she would have been both surprised and grieved if she had guessed how severely Dr. Lyall had taken himself to task for his incautiousness.

'What right have I to be running after that girl?' he said to himself, as he walked back to Braeside. 'What right have I to let her see—as she must see—the pleasure I take in her society, just because she is simpler and more genuine than other girls? Perhaps, after all'—with momentary wavering—'it does not matter to a tough old fellow like me. At thirty-two one is no boy, and a passing fancy cannot hurt me. It is not likely that I should have made an impression on her. What a child she is,' he went on, after following this line of thought for a few minutes, 'in spite of her clever talk! She had no idea how thoroughly I understood her vague illustration. Poor little girl! So they are all bent on marrying her to the handsome cousin, and, from the little I have seen, the young fellow wishes it too. Well, he is a fine, manly type of a young Englishman, and I do not believe she could do better for herself than take him. If I know anything about human nature, he is a thoroughly good fellow. So she is not quite ready with her yea, yea—that is so like a woman. She fears to cheapen herself by too speedy an assent. In this sort of case, to

waver is to yield. I expect Hamlyn will get his way sooner or later. "This lady doth protest too much." And yet the poor child seemed terribly in earnest.'

Human nature is somewhat complex in its workings. For some reason best known to himself, Dr. Lyall was anxious to prove to himself most clearly that Miss Meredith's vacillation of purpose, her doubts and tremors, all showed that she was really not so averse to the family plan, after all.

'She is more sensitive than most girls,' he continued. 'Her conscience is over-scrupulous, and she has a fine notion of honour—this does her credit. By-and-by her scruples will adjust themselves. One day she will wake up to the consciousness that sentiment and duty are reconciled, and then she will accept him all the more thankfully that she has undergone a martyrdom in his behalf. I suppose I am an old fool—I decline to call myself a young one—but I think Hamlyn is to be envied. It must be rather pleasant to have a superior woman concentrating all her thoughts on one in that intelligent fashion. The generality of girls I have seen are certainly feebler in mind, and as a rule they do not interest me. Heigho! One must not pay too dearly for a week's idleness. I will go and have a game of billiards with Hake before dinner. That will be a wiser plan than indulging in introspection.'

Dr. Lyall carried out this resolution promptly. He had a thoroughly healthy organization of mind and body, a steady temperament that would carry him safely through perils to which weaker men would at once succumb. He was sharp-sighted enough to see the danger that menaced him. He was on the brink; he must be wary and draw back in time, before he was wholly fascinated. Dr. Lyall's hand was as steady as usual that evening. He won every game, much to his friend's chagrin, and at dinner he was unusually pugnacious, for he inveigled the curate, Mr. Allingham, into an argument, and vanquished him in every point.

'Lyall is in force to-night,' observed Captain Hake when they left the table. 'He has left Allingham without a leg to stand on.'

Gerda would have been thankful for a quiet half-hour after her mother had left her; she wanted to review her

conversation with Dr. Lyall. But she wasn't to be left in peace. Before ten minutes passed, Doris burst into the room.

'They have come, Gerda; they drove up in the waggonette five minutes ago. You never saw such a lot of men, and most of them tall. Let me see, there was Captain Drummond, and Mr. Harry Power and his brother, and Mr. Seymour and Mr. Lorraine, and his cousin, Fulbert Stanley, and—oh, I forget his name—the dark man with the hook nose, who gave you the petunias.'

'I suppose you mean Mr. Unwin!'

'Yes, of course. I wish his nose was not so excessively Jewish; but he is not really bad-looking. Now, Gerda, we must fly, and dress ourselves, for mother does look so nervous. Gerard is showing them their rooms. Do you hear them stamping down the gallery? I am so excited that I shall never be ready. Mind you put on your dark-blue velveteen, Gerda, for you look so sweet in that. Do hurry up, as Gerard says;' and with this parting monition Doris disappeared.

Gerda heaved an impatient sigh, but her sense of duty made her dress rapidly and hasten to her mother's side. Her manners were so winning and gracious as she received Gerard's friends, that the young man felt a thrill of pride as he watched her.

'She is a darling,' he said to himself. 'I can see how all those fellows admire her. What a wife she will make for me one of these days, if only I can get her to say "Yes!"'

Honest Gerard was becoming thoroughly in earnest, whatever Gerda might choose to aver to the contrary. Propinquity had done much for him. His good-humoured acquiescence in Sir Godfrey's scheme had yielded to a real desire to win his cousin; and more than once on this evening Gerda detected him looking at her with unusual seriousness in his eyes.

The dinner-table that night was a merry one. Sir Godfrey told one or two of his favourite stories, which were listened to by the young men with due respect and decorum. Mr. Seymour, indeed, who had heard them before, was a little too ready with his laugh before the proper tickling

point had been reached, but Sir Godfrey benevolently overlooked this.

'You will laugh more before I finish,' he said benignly. And he was right, for long before the climax was reached Mr. Seymour's suppressed mirth had broken all bounds, and had communicated its infection to the other young men.

'Gentlemen, gentlemen! pray allow me to finish,' pleaded poor Sir Godfrey; but he was not permitted to do so, though this was the best story of all—his *bonne bouche*.

'It is of no use, Sir Godfrey You have nearly killed us already; you should be more careful, really. Look at Drummond; how red in the face he is, and apoplexy in his family, too! Apoplexy—or insanity, which is it, Drummond? I am never quite sure,' continued the lively youth.

Sir Godfrey gave one of his old-fashioned little bows. He hardly knew whether to regard Mr. Seymour's hilarity as a compliment or not; he never liked to be interrupted in his stories, especially that story, and yet, how was it possible to proceed amid peals of laughter?

'If you say any more, Sir Godfrey, our deaths will lie at your door. It is exquisite cruelty, is it not, Drummond? to ask a man to eat such a dinner as this, and then threaten him with apoplexy, by telling him such a story.' And Mr. Seymour shook his head sadly at the old gentleman.

'Shut up, you fool!' whispered Gerard savagely in his chum's ear. 'He will see you are poking fun at him directly.'

But Sir Godfrey saw nothing of the kind. Charlie Seymour was a special favourite, and had his privileges; and, like a wise youth, he always knew the length of his tether, so he at once began talking across the table to Gerda on esoteric Buddhism.

'You are a pupil of occultism, I know, Miss Meredith, and are a devout follower of Madame Blavatsky, and the Arkats and Mahatmas, commonly known as the Brothers. I suppose by this time you have gained additional knowledge; I am rather anxious about my Karma.'

'I am sorry that I cannot give you any information, Mr. Seymour,' returned Gerda sweetly; 'I had no idea you took an interest in esoteric science. This is quite a new de-

parture is it not? Mother, do you not think it is time for us to go? I expect Grand has another story ready;' and at this very broad hint Mrs. Meredith rose at once.

Charlie Seymour was an old adversary, and he and Gerda never met without one pitched battle at least. He had a knack of drawing her out on one of her pet hobbies—Buddhism, Comparative Mythology or Psychology, it did not matter what; and when she had waxed warm and eloquent, and had sufficiently displayed her partial knowledge or utter ignorance, he would then and there turn the whole subject into fun. But for once Gerda was wary, and refused to be entrapped into a discussion.

'I am so glad you remember what you read, Mr. Seymour,' she said, sending a Parthian arrow as she swept out of the room.

The evening passed very pleasantly. Two or three of the guests were decidedly musical: Mr. Harry Power had brought his violin, and his brother played the clarionet; Captain Drummond and the irrepressible Charlie Seymour had good voices; and as both Gerda and Doris sung, they had quite a musical entertainment, which lasted until Sir Godfrey woke up from his usual evening nap, and rather peremptorily ordered all the men off to the billiard-room.

Neither did the next few hours hang heavily on their hands. A brisk six miles walk, a good deal of exercise in the winter tennis-court, and two or three games at billiards after tea, filled up the day. The girls had joined in the tennis tournament, but Mrs. Meredith would not hear of their accompanying the walking party, though Mrs. Hake would willingly have chaperoned them, as she and the Lyalls were to walk with the gentlemen. But they were not without female companionship, as Charlie Seymour expressed it, for as they passed the vicarage they encountered the two Hilton girls and Robina Stewart, with two of the Stewart lads and Mr. Allingham as escort, and Mrs. Hake had induced them to accompany the walking party.

Gerda felt a little pang of regret when Robina told her all about it afterwards. She would have liked to have been of the party, but her mother needed her help, and both she and Doris were kept busy until tea-time. An hour later, as Doris was passing through the hall on her way from the

drawing-room, she saw Gerard standing on the bearskin rug, staring rather gloomily into the fire.

'I thought you were playing billiards, Gerard,' she observed, with some surprise.

'No; I was only looking on; the other fellows are having a match. Where is Gerda? Not dressing already?'—as Doris pointed to the staircase.

'Well, I believe so. Mother told us that we were to be very punctual; but all the same I don't mean to move for another half-hour. That is the best of having a curly crop'—passing her hand over the mass of short soft curls, that somehow suited her face. 'If I had Gerda's long hair I should take ever so much more time to dress.'

'Yes, of course.' But it was easy to see that Gerard had not heard a word of this. He was pulling his moustaches in a perturbed manner, and there was an anxious frown on his brow. 'Look here, Doris,' he said suddenly, 'you and I have always been chums, and I am going to have the first dance with you to-night.'

'Oh, not really, Gerard!' and Doris blushed very prettily at this unexpected compliment.

'So you are engaged to me, you see. Well, we have settled that, and now I want to speak to you about something else. Do you think'—clearing his voice—'that I have a grain of chance with Gerda?'

Doris started, and the pretty colour left her cheeks a little suddenly. She was deep in Gerard's confidence; she had found out all about it one day when they two were having a long walk together, and she had given him a great deal of support and sympathy in her girlish way, and it was understood between them that on all possible and impossible occasions she was to advance Gerard's cause.

'You see,' he went on, for Doris was only twisting her fingers nervously together, and had not answered, 'Uncle Godfrey has been prodding me on again—not that I require prodding'—becoming suddenly conscious that this form of expression was not exactly suitable to the circumstances. 'Uncle Godfrey is always in such a hurry—"Why not do it to-night?" he said to me an hour ago; "you could not have a better opportunity. I have my reasons for giving you this bit of advice, and I assure you you won't

repent taking it." Now, what on earth did he mean by that?'

'I am sure I do not know,' returned Doris, shaking her head rather dejectedly; 'but you need not do it all the same, Gerard; it would be the worst possible time to choose. You and Gerda ought to be thinking only of your guests; not—not——' But here Doris stammered and broke down. 'She—she would not like it, you know.'

'Why not?' for this opposition spurred him on afresh. 'Lots of fellows do it at balls; the music and crowd help, somehow. You don't see the difficulty, Doris'—taking her arm and marching her up and down the polished floor. 'I never can get Gerda alone for a minute. She refuses to walk with me unless you accompany us, and if I ever catch her alone she makes some excuse to leave me. I told you all this before, and you promised to help me'—a little reproachfully.

'So I will, Gerard'—with a suspicious catch in her breath. 'I always—always want to help you.'

'Yes, I know you are a dear little soul, Doey'—Gerard's pet name for her—'and I am not blaming you the least; but I am a bit down about it to-night. I sometimes think she will not have anything to say to me, because I do not care for her books.'

'But you do read sometimes, Gerard.'

'Yes, the paper—and I don't mind a novel, if there is any go in it; but'—with a trace of contempt in his tone for Doris's slowness of comprehension—'do you call that reading? Gerda would like me to study Carlyle and Emerson and Ruskin, and all the old literary fogies, and then she would expect me to talk about them.'

'But surely all that is not necessary in—in—— You know what I mean, Gerard;' for the magnitude of the subject overwhelmed Doris.

'You mean that it is not a necessary condition, or even corollary, of the marriage service. Well, I suppose not, if only Gerda can be persuaded of the fact. I would not allow it to anyone else, but she is just a little bit too uppish on these subjects; for all her grand talk, it is not necessary for a man to be a bookworm. If I can only prove this to her!'

'You must try, Gerard, but I would not—I would not do it to-night if I were you. Now I must really go. Please, please, do not keep me a moment longer, or mother will be annoyed;' and then Gerard reluctantly let her go.

There were two little pearly drops on Doris's hot cheeks as she stood before her toilet-table.

'He is wrong; he must be wrong,' she sighed. 'Gerda could never find it in her heart to refuse him; she is only just keeping him in suspense. I wish he would not be so worried; he was not a bit like himself to-night. Of course she will say "Yes" to him: she shall, she must. It would be too dreadful to see Gerard unhappy.'

'We must do what we think right, even if it give us pain, and leave results,' Gerda was saying to herself that moment. 'How clearly he put it—it was like a sudden flash of strong light in some dark place, it seemed to illumine everything. I must remember those words if I ever find myself in a difficulty again. He is very wise. I should think he made fewer mistakes than most people. Oh, if one could have such a friend!' and Gerda echoed Doris's sigh.

CHAPTER XI

GERARD FINDS HIS OPPORTUNITY

'Most men find they have more courage than they themselves think they have.'—GREVILLE.

MRS. HAKE had made a solemn covenant and promise that she and her guests would be the first to arrive on the eventful evening. She had yielded most willingly to Doris's entreaties to this effect, and had endorsed them for the benefit of Mrs. Meredith, who was a little overwhelmed by her responsibilities.

'We must insist on the Braeside people coming punctually,' Doris had said a few evenings previously. 'There can be no stiffness or formality when Mrs. Hake is in the room; she will make us begin dancing at once, instead of standing about looking at each other;' for Doris was determined to extract as much enjoyment as possible from her first grown-up party.

Mrs. Hake was a woman of honour, and she kept her word; she hunted up her husband and Dr. Lyall from their cosy arm-chairs in the study, and she hurried Pamela remorselessly over her toilet, though that self-willed young lady disliked to hurry herself, and she marshalled her forces with such tact and diplomacy that Captain Hake forgot to grumble, and they were actually at the door of Chesterton Hall before the clock struck eight.

As they passed round the heavy-carved screen that shut off the entrance-door, the ladies uttered an exclamation of delighted surprise; indeed, Pamela thought it was the most

picturesque scene she had ever beheld. All the furniture had been moved into corners or taken away, and the grand proportions of the fine old hall were fully seen for the first time. The Japanese screen had been withdrawn, and the wide broad staircase was exposed to view, the crimson carpet, and pots of azaleas, and tall leafy ferns adding to the effect. A single row of oil-lamps ran round the gallery, while numberless lights below gleamed among wreaths of evergreens and drooping flags. Mrs. Meredith and her daughters stood among the group of gentlemen on the rug. The girls were dressed alike in soft white silk gowns, only Gerda had a spray of pale pink flowers. They had just finished dressing, when their mother had summoned them mysteriously to their grandfather's dressing-room. They found Sir Godfrey standing before an Indian cabinet; he had two worn morocco cases in his hand.

'Gerda,' he said, with his usual solemnity, 'you are the elder, and must have the first choice; take whichever you like, my dear, and my little Dorrie shall have the other.'

Gerda opened the cases; the first one contained a gold necklace of fine antique work, with a pendant of small rose diamonds; in the other there was a double row of pearls with a tiny invisible clasp. The pearls were not large, but their whiteness and delicacy took Gerda's fancy.

'I would rather have the pearls, Grand,' she said, in a satisfied tone; and Sir Godfrey himself clasped the dainty necklace round Gerda's full white throat.

'The children look very nice to-night, Honoria,' he observed, when he had dismissed them; 'neither of them are handsome; but Doris has youth and health, and Gerda is as graceful as a young fawn. I like to see a girl carry her head well.' But here Sir Godfrey checked himself with a short sigh, as he remembered the last time there had been a ball in the old Hall, when Clare and Honoria were girls, and how the slim, dark-eyed Clare had been the belle of the evening.

Mrs. Meredith drew her lace shawl round her shoulders with a slight movement of impatience. Her girls were beautiful in her eyes, and she was dissatisfied with her father's qualified praise. She thought Gerda was looking positively lovely to-night; the pale waxy flowers—Gerard's

gift—had given her the touch of colour she needed; there was a soft brightness in her eyes, and the faintest rose tint in her cheeks. Mrs. Meredith's maternal vanity would have been gratified if she had only known how thoroughly Gerard and Dr. Lyall shared her opinion.

As the Braeside party joined the group round the fire, they found Gerda laying down the law with the utmost animation to Captain Drummond and two or three of the other gentlemen, while Doris listened with a perplexed face.

'It is not right,' she was saying, in her clear young voice. 'Do not let Mr. Seymour talk you over, Dorrie; it is not fair on the other girls; it is taking a mean advantage of them.—Don't you agree with me, Dr. Lyall?'—as he advanced towards the circle—'is it right for us, the daughters of the house, to fill up our programmes before our guests arrive? Doris's programme is full, and I want her to burn it.'

'But surely you mean to dance yourself, Miss Meredith?'

Gerard answered for her:

'She is going to give me three valses, I know. After that it does not matter to me when you fellows cut in.'

'Gerard, be quiet! I will promise you nothing until the other girls have their programmes filled, and then I will dance with everybody.'

'Don't listen to her, Miss Doris,' whispered Charlie Seymour; 'keep your programme—or, look here: let me keep it for you;' and he took it out of Doris's unresisting hand.

Doris looked after it regretfully; she had herself written that shaky 'G.H.' against the first dance, and had explained to each gentleman in succession that the initials belonged to her cousin Gerard. This was the crowning glory of the evening to Doris—this first valse with Gerard. When the moment drew near and the music began, she dimpled with such pride and pleasure that more than one pair of eyes followed her with amused admiration, and Gerard himself looked at her very kindly.

'How grand you look to-night, Doey! Diamonds, too!' with a glance at the glittering pendant. 'Come along, we shall have the floor to ourselves:' and Gerard's strong arm

and smooth step transported the little girl into a sort of Elysium.

That no one could dance like Gerard was part of Doris's creed, and even Gerda agreed that it was the one thing he did perfectly.

Sir Godfrey was afraid he was growing just a little deaf; he said as much to Charlie Seymour.

'I am afraid I am getting a little hard of hearing, as our Stokes says,' he observed. 'I thought I overheard Dalton telling the Hiltons' coachman to bring round the carriage at half-past two—but of course it must have been my fancy: half-past twelve were my orders.'

'I am afraid there must be a draught somewhere,' returned Charlie nonchalantly. 'If you take my advice, Sir Godfrey, you will keep at the other end of the hall; there! I hear wheels; the door is going to open again. My dear sir, I positively insist on your taking more care of yourself.' And Charlie took his host's arm, and forcibly conducted him to the fireplace.

'What an extraordinary thing! Grandfather's clock has stopped!' observed Gerard gravely, as he carried off Gerda for the second valse.

Gerda stood still in amazement.

'What can have happened to it?' she asked anxiously. But a sudden twinkle in Gerard's eyes undeceived her.

'You must ask Seymour. I am afraid that bad boy has been up to his tricks again. "Small and early"—that is a comprehensive term, he assures me. Happily, the roads are safe, and there is some chance of a moon.'

'You two have been plotting mischief,' returned Gerda shrewdly. 'Grand thinks it will be all over at half-past twelve. I heard him tell Mrs. Owen that he considered these Cinderella dances so sensible. He will be very angry when he finds it out, Gerard.'

'We will make up a rubber of whist presently, and then he will know nothing about it. I think this is going to be a success, Gerda; the people all seem enjoying themselves. Look at Allingham! That is the second time he has danced with the fair Frances. I wonder what his Vicar would say?'

Mr. Allingham had forgotten all about his Vicar Frances

Hilton always looked back on the evening of the Hamlyns' dance as one of the most important crises of her life, for it was in the dimly-lighted conservatory that Herbert Allingham had ventured to speak of his love. 'Lots of fellows do it at balls,' Gerard had said, and on this evening his words were verified.

'Do you intend to spare me one dance?' asked Dr. Lyall, as Gerard deposited his cousin on a seat, and rushed off to secure his next partner; and as he asked the question he took the fan out of her hand, and began to fan her with a practised hand.

Gerda elevated her eyebrows slightly.

'I thought you did not care about dancing?'

'Oh, there are exceptions to every rule; and I shall care very much about dancing with you. I am afraid, though, that I shall hardly distinguish myself as creditably as Hamlyn —he seems an exceptionally good dancer.'

'So we all think. Gerard is quite in his element to-night. What do you think, Dr. Lyall? He and Mr. Seymour have stopped grandfather's clock for fear of its telling tales, and they have given orders to Dalton that none of the carriages are to come until half-past two. Grand would be in such a fuss if he knew that. Are you ready?' as Dr. Lyall smiled and offered his arm, and she rose a little reluctantly.

She did not quite believe in Dr. Lyall's capabilities as a partner, and she would rather have talked to him in this quiet corner. She was agreeably surprised, however. Dr. Lyall did not acquit himself so badly, after all. He had a good ear, and danced quietly and evenly.

'I think you were hardly speaking the truth when you said you could not dance,' Gerda observed rather reproachfully as they paced up and down the long gallery, which was used to-night as a promenade. Pamela flashed an amused look at them as she passed.

Alick was looking quite young and good-looking, she thought; evening dress always suited dark men. He made an excellent foil to Miss Meredith's fairness; she, too, was looking unusually well—that coronet of plaits just suited her style. She had a faint idea that Alick rather admired her; though she dare not hint such a thing to him for worlds.

for, with all her audacity, Pamela was a little in awe of her brother.

'Did I say I could not dance?' remonstrated Dr. Lyall. 'I think you must have misunderstood me. I am rather indifferent on the subject; but, after all, it is good exercise.'

Dr. Lyall spoke in an easy, unembarrassed tone, but he was secretly conscious of an undue bounding of his pulses at this implied compliment. He was a fool, of course—he was always calling himself a fool now—but it was very pleasant sauntering up and down with a certain little gloved hand resting on his arm.

'Do you admire our decorations?' she asked next.

'Very much,' was the reply; 'but you must forgive me if I say the light is a little too subdued. So much black oak absorbs the brightness of all those lamps. If you could only have electric light, now, the effect would be superb.'

'I suppose so. That is the worst of you Londoners—nothing is good enough for you. To our country-bred minds this soft moony light is very pretty.'

'Did I say otherwise? You are a little hard on me to-night, Miss Meredith. But perhaps I expressed myself awkwardly. I know when I go back to town I shall carry away a vivid picture of this old hall. Can anything be prettier than that moving crowd below us—all those smiling faces and gay dresses?'

'There is Captain Drummond looking up at us. I am engaged to him for the next dance. You are not going back to town yet, Dr. Lyall? you have only been here a week.'

'It has been the longest week I have ever spent in my life, and I think I may say the pleasantest,' responded Dr. Lyall a little dreamily. 'Yes, we leave the day after to-morrow; my patients cannot spare me any longer. Besides, ten days' idleness is enough for any man.'

'That is very soon,' replied Gerda in a low voice.

And then Captain Drummond came up to them and carried her off. Gerda did not make herself as pleasant as usual to her partner. She was a little absent and *distraite*. She was sorry to hear that the Lyalls were leaving so soon. She liked Pamela, and wanted to know her better, and she was by no means indifferent to Pamela's brother.

'What is the use of making friends if one has to lose

them?' she thought discontentedly. 'When Dr. Lyall gets back to his patients, he will forget all about us. I dare say he will not even remember that he has saved my life, though I shall never, never forget it.'

Gerard had not found his opportunity yet. He had had his three valses with Gerda, in spite of all her protestations.

'You ought not to monopolize me to-night,' she said in rather a vexed voice, as he came up to her the third time; 'besides, I am sure that this dance belongs to Mr. Seymour.'

'I will make it right with him,' returned Gerard easily. 'You ought to be grateful to me for rescuing you from a partner who only reaches your shoulder. I do hate to see a tall girl and a little man dancing together. You and Seymour look like a wasp and a may-pole together. You need not dance with me, you know, and we can sit out if you like.'

But Gerda could not be induced to see this. She liked dancing with Gerard better than with anyone, and she knew that when they danced together people stood still to watch them. Her step suited his perfectly, so it was no wonder that, as Dr. Lyall looked down on them from the gallery, he muttered to himself that it was the perfect poetry of motion.

'Is not this a charming scene, Alick?' and Pamela roused him with a smart tap of her fan. 'Are you watching the dancers? Does not Mr. Hamlyn waltz well? He has only asked me once, and that is the third time he has danced with his cousin.'

'Do you mean that you are envious, Pam? I thought Vincent objected to valses.' And Dr. Lyall looked at his sister with latent fun in his eyes.

Pamela frowned. Evidently the remark did not please her.

'I hope you do not expect me to give in to all Derrick's absurd views. When he gives up smoking I will promise to give up dancing. I mean to tell him that some day; that is the worst of being engaged'—and Pamela looked very pretty and naughty—'it is putting yourself in the power of a tyrant. Derrick thinks he has the right to lecture me.'

'Well, I suppose he has—at least, he believes he has the right. But when you talk of tyranny, I think it is rather the other way. I don't think Vincent gets the best of it.'

'Oh, I am quite aware of your opinion by this time,' returned Pamela, with a vixenish look at her brother's amused face. 'Why do you not go and tell Derrick all my faults, and beg him to give me up? It would be so like you, Alick, to go and do a thing of that kind, and call it duty.'

'Would it? Do you know, I expect he has found them all out by this time. In spite of his laziness, Vincent is very shrewd and clear-sighted. I dare say you often give him a taste of your temper, Pam.'

'Oh, you are not going to exasperate me,' she replied quickly. 'Why do you not go and dance, instead of finding fault with your poor little sister? There is that plain Miss Hilton without a partner—let me introduce you to her.'

'Thanks, awfully; but I have finished dancing for to-night. You had better talk to her instead.'

But Pamela only shrugged her shoulders. In another minute the yellowish silk skirt was floating away among the dancers. Pamela had no moments to throw away on plain-faced Augusta Hilton. The irrepressible Charlie had consoled himself for his lost partner in listening to her sharp, merry speeches.

'She is engaged, is she?' Charlie was heard to remark later on in the smoking-room. 'Who's the fellow? I have half a mind to call him out. Six feet high, is he?'—in answer to some remark—'well, I don't care. David stood up to Goliath, didn't he? and your humble servant has cheek enough for anything. I like a lively girl with plenty of go in her. Temper! Of course she has got a temper. All the right sort of women have—prevents stagnation, wholesome irritant, and all that kind of thing. If it were not for Goliath I would go in and win.'

'Is it Miss Lyall's charms or the champagne that has been too much for you, Charlie?' asked Captain Drummond lazily. 'Take my advice, my dear boy—"marry with your ears, and not with your eyes." Miss Lyall's voice is not to my taste; it is a trifle too acrid.'

Gerard had not yet found his opportunity. It was growing late—a fact of which Sir Godfrey was happily oblivious; he and his partner had just won their second rubber, and the third was inevitable. But all comes to him who waits, and just then a set of lancers was formed, and

Gerda relinquished her partner under the plea of fatigue to the younger Miss Hilton. Gerard, who was also resting from his labours, strolled quietly across the hall, and joined her.

'We are both out of it, I see,' he observed as she gave him a welcoming smile. 'Suppose we find a quiet corner somewhere;' and Gerda fell innocently into the trap.

She was a little surprised, however, when Gerard led the way to the morning-room. It had not been used that evening, and the fire had burnt low. Gerard took up the poker and stirred it a little noisily, while Gerda stood beside him on the rug. The next moment he threw it down, and took hold of her hands.

'Gerda, I want to speak to you—it is no good putting it off any longer. Do you remember that question I asked you in the boat last spring?' Then she tried to shrink away from him, but his grasp was too strong. 'I told you then that I should try again,' he went on, 'and I meant it. You were very hard on me that day, you would not believe that I was in earnest; but I meant it then, and I mean it a hundred times more now. You will give me a different answer now, dear, will you not?'

'Oh, Gerard, not to-night! Please do not ask me to-night;' and there was such a troubled look on her face that he released her hand, and an anxious expression came into his eyes.

'I have given you plenty of time to think of it,' he returned reproachfully. 'Nine months—that is surely long enough! You could not have misunderstood me, Gerda. I was always fond of you, but now I would rather have you for my wife than any other girl. You believe that, do you not?'—speaking very gravely. 'If you will only consent to marry me, you shall never repent it—never.'

'Gerard, I cannot—do not ask me!' and Gerda sank into a seat and covered her face with her hands. What were those words that seemed to surge through her brain over and over again? 'We must do what we think right, even if it give us pain, and leave results. We must do what we think right.' 'I cannot—indeed I cannot!'

'But why not?' he pleaded, and his face became a little pale. 'We have always been such friends, you and I. I

know you are fond of me, Gerda—you cannot deny that, and if it's not quite the right feeling, if it has not grown with you as it has with me, it will come, if you are only patient.'

But he seemed speaking to deaf ears. An inner voice was clamouring to be heard too, and would not be silenced: 'Follow your conscience; do what you think to be right and true.'

'Gerard, I dare not do it. It would be wrong to you as well as to myself. I love you, but not in that way;' and the agonized sincerity of her voice struck a chill into Gerard's heart. But he would not be baffled yet. This was his last chance, and he must make the most of it.

'You think that you do not care for me enough,' he replied gently. 'But suppose I am willing to take the risk of that, and to be content with what you have to give me?'

But she shook her head sadly.

'Nothing would make it right. I am very sorry, Gerard, but you must give it up. I would do anything for you but this. I would die for you if need be'—with a quick, loving impulse that she could not resist. But he only answered this by a melancholy smile.

'I would rather you lived for me. Gerda, just be patient with me another minute. I want to get to the bottom of this. Are you afraid that I shall not satisfy you? Are you giving me this answer because I do not care for all the books and things for which you care? Is it because you think I am not clever enough? I cannot promise to alter—a man must act up to his own nature—but you will be making a grievous mistake if you let this come between us.'

'Oh, Gerard, it is not that;' and for the moment Gerda thought she was speaking the truth.

'Then what is it? But there, I will not press you. I always knew you were too good for me, Gerda. I was a fool not to see there was no chance for me.'

'I wish I could have answered differently,' she sighed. 'But you will not think me too unkind, will you? If you only knew how unhappy you have made me, I am sure you would forgive me.'

'There is nothing to forgive,' he returned hastily 'I have tried and failed. It is no fault of yours if you cannot

make up your mind to take me. Look here, Gerda, I have said my last word; I would not be such a cad as to persecute you. You have nothing more to fear from me. I shall be Cousin Gerard to the end of the chapter.'

She bent her head in answer to this, but he could see the slow tears rolling down her cheeks. How good he was! how manly and generous! How could she find it in her heart to say him nay?

'I don't want you to fret about it. I suppose I shall get over it some day—other fellows do. Now I may as well go back to my duties;' and as she did not look up or make any response, he bent over her and kissed the coronet of soft shining hair. It was the first time he had ever kissed her, and he knew it would be the last. But Gerda was hardly conscious of the act as she wiped the tears away with her handkerchief. It was the first real pain in her young life, and she felt as though she hardly knew how to bear it.

CHAPTER XII

'YOU HAVE HELPED ME'

'When you are young grief is a tempest which prostrates you; at mature age it is simply a north wind which adds a wrinkle to your brow and one more white hair to your head.'—*Thoughts of a Queen.*

It was nearly three o'clock, and more than one carriage had driven away with its merry chattering occupants, when Dr. Lyall, straying through the deserted rooms in search of his hostess, wandered into the morning-room, attracted by the cheery blaze of the renovated fire. Charlie Seymour was rattling off a lively valse, while the musicians were refreshing themselves, and the indefatigable Pamela was whirling away with Captain Drummond. The other couples had followed her example, Doris and Gerard among them; for Gerard, in spite of the dull knawing pain at his heart, could not resist Doris's plaintive and appealing blue eyes. 'Please dance with me,' they seemed to say, and with his customary good-nature he had given in. But after all, Doris was not to enjoy her dance; the first two rounds were perfect, and then she had whispered breathlessly:

'I saw you with Gerda just now. Did you do it, Gerard?' But Gerard tightened his grasp a little convulsively; he had not expected this.

'Hush! don't ask me, Doey. There is no chance for me now. I wish I had taken your advice; but one cannot always be wise. Never speak of it again, there's a good girl!' and Gerard's step became so rapid that Doris turned a little giddy.

'I think I will sit down,' she faltered; 'I am so sorry, Gerard. It was good of you to dance with me!' and then she moved away from him, and sat down with a very sober face.

Poor Doris! it was hard on her—on her first party, too. 'She has hurt him—oh, she has hurt him dreadfully!' she thought; and her bosom heaved with indignant sympathy.

Dr. Lyall had caught the gleam of a white dress in the firelight, and his eyes brightened a little; but the next moment he was conscious of a revulsion of feeling. At the sound of his step Gerda had looked up at him, and her eyes were still full of tears. Her paleness and intense agitation were so apparent that, after the first impulse to withdraw, his professional instinct drew him towards her.

'You are not well; you have fatigued yourself. Let me fetch you a glass of wine?' But she put out a cold shaking hand to stop him.

'No, thank you, I do not want anything; I am only a little troubled about something that has happened. It is foolish to cry,' as a large tear fell in her lap, 'I am not often so silly; but——' She could say no more.

'You are tired; you have danced too much. Why will you persist in thinking yourself so strong?' returned Dr. Lyall impatiently. 'When one is low it is impossible to take cheerful views of things. You have been neglecting yourself as usual; perhaps you have taken no supper? I will fetch you a little wine and water, and a biscuit.'

Dr. Lyall's quiet, matter-of-fact tones roused Gerda. She had a vexed consciousness that he thought her missish, perhaps hysterical; she could not tell him that real trouble had overtaken her, and made her wretched; she could not sufficiently control her voice to prove this to him; she was obliged to let him fetch the wine and water, and as his will was stronger than hers, she was forced to drink it; but he saw with concern, that, after all, the discomfort was more mental than bodily.

'I wish I could do something for you,' he said in a kind voice, as he set down the emptied glass. Then he saw a sudden expression of gratitude in her swollen eyes.

'You have helped me; you do not know how much you have helped me,' she replied in so low a voice that he had to stoop to catch her meaning.

'I!' he returned in surprise. 'You must make a mistake, Miss Meredith.'

'No, indeed!' and her voice became stronger. 'Do you remember what you said to me yesterday on the Chilverton Road? The words have been ringing in my ears ever since. "We must do the right thing, even if it give us pain." Well, I have been putting those words into practice, and it has given me pain—that is all; but I thank you all the same, Dr. Lyall—I do indeed!'

He was listening intently, and at one point in her sentence a quick flash of joy came into his eyes, but it faded instantly.

'I must not pretend to understand you,' he said gravely; but her meaning was as plain to him as the traces of the tears on her face. 'I was not aware of saying those words to you, but, all the same, I must not disclaim them; they are true, as heaven above us is true,' with sudden energy.

'Yes, I know that now; they came to me like a light in the darkness. That is why I thanked you for saying them.'

'I am glad if they have helped you,' he returned very seriously; 'but I think,' after a moment's hesitation, 'that you would never go far wrong. You have a more tender conscience than most people, and a truer sense of honour.' The words seemed wrung from him, somehow; he was a man who seldom paid compliments, and even in her despondency Gerda felt a thrill of pride as she heard them. 'Now I must bid you good-bye, for everyone will be leaving. I shall not see you again, but——'

'What will your sister think of me?' she interrupted. 'I must go to her.'

'Indeed, you must do nothing of the kind,' was the reply. 'I will give her a message—a dozen if you like—but you are only fit to go to your own room.' And Gerda felt the wisdom of this advice.

'Very well. Will you give her my love, and ask her to come to-morrow? Then I shall not see you again, Dr Lyall?'

'I think not—no, I am certain you will not,' forming the instant resolution to keep away from the perilous atmosphere of Chesterton Hall.

Gerda had risen as she spoke, and stood looking very slim and young in her white gown.

'So it is good-bye, you see,' he went on quickly, as he took her hand. 'Take care of yourself, Miss Meredith.' This was all he could find to say, but for many a night he remembered the girl as she stood there before him, with that careworn, weary look on her face. If he had known how soon they were to meet, he would not have gone away with that sudden weight on his mind. As it was, he only called himself a fool, and addressed a few crushing remarks to Pamela, when, with her usual want of tact, she questioned him about his gravity. She punished him, however, by receiving Gerda's message very coolly.

'Mrs. Meredith and Doris both asked me,' she replied curtly. 'I have promised to go to luncheon, and Gertrude is to come too. They want us to help entertain the gentlemen; they do not leave before the afternoon train. And Doris says there are too many for her and her sister to manage.'

'It is a good thing you are going to take Pamela home, Dr. Lyall,' observed Mrs. Hake mischievously. 'I think that poor Mr. Vincent ought to have a hint given him. I am not quite sure he would have approved of that flirtation with Mr. Seymour. In my time an engaged girl never danced more than twice with the same gentleman.'

'As you are both so disagreeable, I shall go to bed,' returned Pamela, with dignity. 'Alick is as cross as two sticks—not that that is anything new, only he is generally better-tempered before people—and as for you, Gertrude, matrimony has not improved you.—I am sorry to speak so plainly, Captain Hake, but you ought to keep your wife in better order.'

And, with this parting fling, Pamela withdrew to sit by her fire in her smart dressing-gown, and read over Derrick Vincent's last letter for the fifth time; and as she laid it down there was a pucker on her forehead.

'If Derrick were not so Derrick-like!' she muttered. 'I begin to despair of him. He will never alter—no more shall I. Oh, why—why did I ever care for him if he is always going to make me miserable?' and Pamela's eyebrows nearly met her hair as she sat there staring into the

fire, until she looked like a little old witch in her striped scarlet and black peignoir.

'She has refused him,' was Dr. Lyall's last waking thought before he fell asleep in the dark wintry morning. 'It is strange! But, then, women do act strangely—one can never predicate their actions with certainty. I should have said any girl would be safe and happy with Hamlyn. But there, it is no concern of mine. Why should I pretend to be glad? As though her refusing another man had anything to do with me! I vow it will be a long time before I take a week's holiday again, unless I go abroad. Pamela shall not wheedle me to Braeside again in a hurry;' and as Dr. Lyall registered this mental vow he turned over and fell asleep.

Gerda had slipped away to her room, and Doris was the bearer of her excuses: 'Gerda had a headache, and was too tired to come down. She wished them all good-night.' But Doris faltered over her little speech, and looked very guilty as she caught Gerard's eye.

'Oh, Gerda! how could you go and do it?' she had began reproachfully when she found her sister alone, but Gerda cut her short.

'Doris, I cannot talk to you to-night; you must say nothing to me—not one word!' and then she had given her message and closed her door, disregarding Doris's piteous look. But her heart smote her, and she opened it again. 'Kiss me, Dorrie dear, and say good-night. And don't look so miserable; it will not help me, or him either;' and her lip quivered as she turned away.

Gerda knew that she would have a difficult part to play the next day, and would need all her strength to play it well. Gerard would not tell his uncle of the failure of his hopes until their guests had left the Hall, and it would tax all their ingenuity to act so naturally that Sir Godfrey's sharp old eyes should detect nothing wrong. Sir Godfrey had indeed put a question, when the young men had betaken themselves to the smoking-room, and Gerard had lingered behind them for a moment.

'I suppose you have nothing to tell me that would interest me, eh, Gerard?' with a keen look at his nephew.

'No, sir; I believe not,' was the quiet reply, and Sir

Godfrey looked disappointed. Nevertheless, he went off to bed, happily quite unconscious that Gerard had played his last card.

'In my time a young fellow would not have shilly-shallied as Gerard is doing,' he grumbled, as he took the loose silver out of his pocket and regarded it admiringly—it was his winnings, the money he had duly and lawfully earned by his own skilful play. '"Strike while the iron is hot!" is my motto. "Blow cold, blow hot," never answered in love matters. Young men are too lazy to make love properly nowadays; they think they have only got to beckon to a girl, and she will come to their call like a tame greyhound.'

Gerard would willingly have gone to bed, too; he felt fagged in body and mind. But his guests held a different opinion.

'We must have a pipe and a palaver, old fellow!' remonstrated Charlie Seymour, and Gerard had to take his part in the lively discussion that followed.

Breakfast was not until a late hour the next morning, and Gerda, who always poured out the tea and coffee, found the large silver urn a very sufficient screen. Charlie Seymour, who was the first to arrive on the scene, thought both the young ladies were unaccountably grave. Doris, who shared her sister's depression, was quite monosyllabic in her replies.

'I expect their mother has given them a wigging,' thought the astute youth after a stolen glance at Gerda's lowered eyelids and Doris's frightened blue eyes. 'Never trust a soft-spoken woman who seems as though butter would not melt in her mouth. She is pretty sure to be a termagant in private.'

But, happily oblivious of this criticism, Mrs. Meredith at this moment smiled so sweetly at him that Charlie grew red and stammered some sort of reply.

'Doris and I are so tired. I wish you would talk for us,' whispered Gerda; and Charlie nodded a cheerful assent.

For the rest of breakfast-time his lively flow of nonsense never ceased; and when the meal was over, he challenged the gentlemen to another tennis-match, leaving the girls to

huddle over the fire in their easy-chairs, with their work and books, while Mrs. Meredith and the servants tried to bring order out of the chaotic ball-room of last night.

Doris tried vainly to make Gerda talk, but the latter obstinately refused to open her lips; so Doris at last went off in despair to her mother's help, until Mrs. Hake and Pamela arrived—looking blooming from a long walk in the cold air, and both ready for a long, delicious gossip.

Things went more comfortably after this. Pamela and Charlie Seymour renewed their flirtation of the previous evening, and during luncheon Charlie was seen to take his dandy pocket-book out and write an address:

'"Roadside, Cromehurst." Thanks awfully, Miss Lyall. I will be sure to look your brother up when I am in town. My people live in Yorkshire, you know, but now and then my father takes a house for the season when the mater and the girls bully him into it. I am rather a wandering satellite myself—here, there, and everywhere, as the immortal Miss Mowcher remarks. Well, well, "man wants but little here below, but wants that little hot," as one of our fellows said when the butler offered him cold buttered toast; for it stands to reason, Miss Lyall, that if you are you, and I I, as Kant tries to prove——' and so on, much to the delight and mystification of Pamela, who dearly loved a joke.

Pamela, who was always candid, and never tried to disguise her real sentiments, averred an open and decided preference for the society of the stronger sex. 'I never met more than half a dozen women in the whole course of my existence,' she was once heard to remark, 'who really interested me, and to whom I could talk for more than half an hour without a mental yawn. Women are either too frivolous or too serious,' continued the young philosopher. 'There is no happy medium. It is either dress, servants, or the kingdom of heaven.' For Pamela was not orthodox, and would at times startle her hearers with daring paradoxes or trite sayings, which wholly lacked reverence; but then, as Pamela was the first to allow, she had no bump of reverence.

Pamela had really no time to bestow on Gerda until the fascinating Charlie and the rest of the gentlemen had taken their leave, and then she accosted her with her usual abruptness.

'What is the matter, Miss Meredith? You look utterly fagged, as though you had been dancing for three nights in succession. Why, Gertrude and I are as fresh as possible! I believe I can do with less sleep than most people;' and she looked inquisitively, but not unkindly, at Gerda as she spoke.

'You forget how unused we are to gaiety,' replied Gerda, colouring a little under this scrutiny. 'Doris and I feel quite dissipated. Are you going by the early train to-morrow?'

'I suppose so. Alick has turned restless—I may say fidgety—and even grudges me time for packing. It is no use my telling him that I dislike to hurry myself. When my lord is in this mood, argument only makes him worse. By-the-bye, he desires his kind regards—let me see: "Please to remember me very kindly to Mrs. Meredith, and to every member of the family"—yes, I think those were his very words.'

'Please remember us to him,' returned Gerda hurriedly.

'Very well, if I do not forget. Dear me! Gertrude is wrapping herself up in her furs. Don't you love sable, Miss Meredith? I think I share the love of a pussy-cat for soft, warm things. If I had that mantle I should always be stroking myself and purring with enjoyment. Well, good-bye; I see we have to go. I would much rather stay and talk to you; but *au revoir!*' and, in spite of her flippant talk, there was real womanliness and hearty good-will in the kiss she gave Gerda.

As Gerda turned away from the door, she saw Gerard close behind her. He had not approached her the whole of the day, though there had been nothing pointed in his avoidance of her; but now she saw that he had something to say to her.

'They are all off now,' he began hurriedly, as she waited for a moment, 'and I am thankful to get rid of them. They are capital fellows, all of them; but, really, Seymour gets worse and worse. The way he has carried on all day is enough to make one's head ache. I believe Uncle Godfrey was quite shocked once or twice.'

'He is very nice and very kind-hearted, and no one minds his fun.'

'Miss Lyall did not, certainly;' and then Gerard stopped

and cleared his throat, and then began again: 'Look here, Gerda, I want to say something; it is no use putting it off. Uncle Godfrey is bound to know, and we may as well get it over. One day is as good as another when one has anything disagreeable to do;' and Gerard gave an uneasy laugh.

'You may tell him whenever you like, Gerard. You are quite right; procrastination never helped anyone yet.'

'Thanks; I thought you would agree with me. Uncle Godfrey will put himself and everyone else in a fuss—he always does, you know—but you need not mind it; and, Gerda, while we are about it, I may just as well say one thing more—if it will make you more comfortable, I will go away for a bit; I'll run up to town and have a look round, and perhaps Seymour will ask me down to Airdale.'

'There is no need for you to go away,' returned Gerda, in a distressed tone; but he would not let her finish.

'It will make things easier for us both, and when I come back we will try and forget all about this;' and Gerard nodded to her with his old kind smile, and turned on his heel and went straight to the library, where Sir Godfrey was dozing over his book.

Gerda caught her breath with a little sob as she looked after him, and asked herself, for the twentieth time, why a girl's heart should be made so hard, and why she could not love this simple, loyal gentleman, with his true English nature—at once so honest and so brave. And Doris, sitting by the fireside, was thinking much the same thing.

'No one but Gerda would have done it,' she sighed.

Gerda stood for a few moments in silent debate with herself; then she joined her mother and sister.

'Mother,' she said impulsively, 'I have something to tell you that will give you pain.—No, Dorrie, you need not go away'—as Doris rose, and then re-seated herself on a stool at her sister's feet. 'Last night you thought me unkind, but I was too unhappy to talk.—Mother, it is all over between me and Gerard. He has spoken to me again, and it is for the last time.'

'You have refused him? Oh, Gerda, Gerda!' and Mrs. Meredith sank back in her chair, and all her strength left her. What was the use of bringing daughters into the

world if they were to inflict such bitter disappointment as this?

'I suppose so; there was nothing else to do. I could not wrong either him or myself. If I had accepted him, it would have been a grievous sin against truth. Oh, it was quite simple,' went on Gerda in a rapt, monotonous tone, as though the fireside circle had an unseen hearer, to whom she was addressing herself; 'it was plain as daylight; one could make no mistake. There can only be one right and one wrong,' she finished, repeating almost unconsciously the doctor's words.

'I don't know what you mean, Gerda,' returned her mother angrily, for she thought her daughter was singularly perverse. 'You were always as fond of Gerard as possible. I remember your grandfather used to call you Gerard's little wife when you were a mere child, and now, just for a girlish whim or fancy, you have thrown him over, and upset the peace of the household.' And Mrs. Meredith looked so flushed and perturbed as she spoke that Charlie Seymour would hardly have thought himself wrong in his uncharitable criticism.

Doris gave her sister's hand a loving little squeeze. She was sorely divided in her sympathies. Her heart was aching for Gerard's disappointment, and last night she had been inclined to be hard on Gerda. But the distress on Gerda's face softened her.

'You could not help it, could you, dear?' she whispered.

'I think Gerda could have helped it if she had taken a little longer time for decision,' observed Mrs. Meredith with illogical severity, for of all women she was the last to advocate matrimony without love. But what is the use of being a woman if one is forced to study logic? 'When so much depends on it, when the peace of an entire household is at stake, there should certainly be more time given for consideration. There was no need to give Gerard a decided answer.'

'Dear mother,' returned Gerda with praiseworthy gentleness, 'would that be treating Gerard well—does he not deserve everything that I can give him? Would it add to his peace of mind or better ensure his ultimate recovery if I had left him in suspense for weeks?'

'It would have given him a chance of winning you.'

'No, mother, no; you are wrong, and Gerard would not agree with you. Neither weeks nor months would make any difference: as soon as I was sure of my own mind, I was right to give him his answer. Mother dear, it is no use talking about it. It is a grievous pity, but it cannot be helped. Doris knows I have tried my best for Gerard.'

'Oh, if Doris was in your confidence——' began Mrs. Meredith rather stiffly.

'Doris was in Gerard's confidence, were you not, Dorrie?' for she had long suspected this; and Doris hung her head and blushed. 'Mother, you are looking at this from Grand's point of view—you are not talking like your dear self at all;' and at this touching appeal Mrs. Meredith's motherly soul seemed to melt within her.

'I am so unhappy, Gerda, but, after all, it is not your fault, you poor child!' and here there was the full kiss of reconciliation with which women always seal their compacts. 'Affection is not to be forced, but it will be very uncomfortable for us all.'

'Gerard wants to go away,' observed Gerda in a low voice; 'he says it will make things easier. But, mother'—as Doris's face grew very long at this—'I would rather go away myself. Grand will not be nice to me for a long time; he will treat me as though I have committed some heinous crime that must shut me out of his favour. Gerard's going away will not help to make home pleasanter to me, but if I take refuge with Aunt Clare the storm will soon blow over.'

'But we shall lose you, Gerda,' returned her mother sorrowfully, for she never liked to part with her girls; they were the only consolations of the widow's heart. In their youth and brightness she found her best happiness. There were times when she hardly knew which she loved best. She was more sure of Doris's sympathy, which was indeed, never failing; but she relied more on Gerda's strength.

'It will not be for long,' replied Gerda in a coaxing voice, for she was bent on having her way.

Aunt Clare was a friend for adversity, she knew. She had one of those strong, helpful natures which are so restful

to weaker folk, and she was never too busy to listen to other people's troubles.

'You must tell Grand that you would like me to go to Aunt Clare for a little,' continued Gerda decidedly; and then Mrs. Meredith sighed, and promised that she would do her best.

CHAPTER XIII

SIR GODFREY HAS A TOUCH OF GOUT

'If you are going to visit the wolf, take your dogs with you.'—*Proverb of Montenegro.*

'In growing old we become more foolish—and more wise.'—La Rochefoucauld.

While Gerda was discussing her future plans somewhat soberly with her mother and sister, Gerard was having rather a bad time with Sir Godfrey.

A threatened touch of gout, which had just heralded its approach by a premonitory twinge or two, had by no means sweetened Sir Godfrey's temper, and on Gerard's broad shoulders fell the first shock of the old man's bitter disappointment.

Gerard bore it for some minutes, with his usual passive good-nature, only shrugging his shoulders when a more angry invective or hard cutting speech reached his ears, but he presently entered his protest.

'After all, Uncle Godfrey,' he remarked coolly, 'the disappointment is more mine than yours. There is not the slightest need for all this vituperation. If you excite yourself in this unseemly manner, you will only bring on an attack of gout. All the talk in the world will not mend matters. Gerda has a right to say whom she will or will not marry, and it is no blame to her if she cannot make up her mind to take me. I shall certainly not give her the chance of refusing me again,' for this was the line of action that Sir Godfrey was pressing on his grand-nephew. 'I am

not quite such an ass as that. I have done all I can to carry out your wishes and my own too, and it is no fault of mine that I have failed.'

'I am not blaming you,' retorted Sir Godfrey angrily, for this manly expostulation was not without effect on him. 'I am only disgusted that any girl should have had the bad taste to refuse you. It is just Gerda's obstinacy; she has always been obstinate from a child; her mother has spoilt her; she has given way to her in everything, and this is the result.'

'I cannot say that I agree with you,' replied Gerard, 'you are a little bit down just now, but by-and-by, when you think over things quietly, you will take a different view of it all. Look here, Uncle Godfrey, I must just say one thing—I hope you do not mean to speak to Gerda about this; it will do no good, and only increase the general discomfort. I think I have the right to ask this.'

'You may tell the girl that I wash my hands of her and the whole business from this day forth,' returned Sir Godfrey irritably; 'she is an ungrateful child, and I shall take no further trouble with her. My little Dorrie is worth two of her. Mark my words, Gerard, one day she will repent of this foolish conduct, and then my young lady will be trying to lure you back. Could you not make love to some one else, just in pretence, you know? There is nothing a woman will not do to oust a rival.'

But as Gerard refused somewhat shortly to do any such thing, Sir Godfrey lapsed into fretful sullenness.

'I told you so, mother,' observed Gerda wearily, as they stood by the drawing-room fire. They had just risen from the dinner-table, but Doris and Gerard had not followed them. 'I am to be sent to Coventry. Grand will not speak to me or look at me. Of course, Rogers and Dalton know that I am in disgrace. Dalton was so sorry for me that he handed me the vanilla cream twice. There was something quite persuasive in his manner, as he brought it the second time, and when I refused it he looked quite sorrowful.'

'If all our meals are to be like this,' sighed Mrs. Meredith, 'I think I shall plead indisposition, and absent myself from the table. Every mouthful that I took seemed to

choke me. Your grandfather is angry with me as well as with you. When anything goes wrong, it is always I who have to bear the blame. He will open his mouth to neither of us—I can see that plainly.'

'Poor dear mother! and it is all my fault;' and Gerda kissed her remorsefully. 'I wish I were a good girl like Doris. Doris will never make anyone's heart ache; but never mind, Grand will not long be vexed with you—you are too necessary to his comfort; he cannot do without you. If he will not speak to me, I must just speak to him, that is all;' and the very next day Gerda carried out her intention. Gerda had never been afraid of her grandfather; her keen young eyes had long ago taken his true measure—his dignity, his arbitrary will and hot temper—and his small, narrow views of life were regarded by her with pitying toleration. In her independent, girlish fashion she had been good to him; but she had never comported herself towards him with Doris's meek submission. If Sir Godfrey had ordered Doris to marry her cousin she would have opened her blue eyes with intense amazement, and would have accepted him without a moment's hesitation; but, then, Doris had no indefinite yearnings after an ideal, and in an unconscious, simple way she already loved Gerard, though neither she nor he guessed that fact. Doris was one of those happy-minded people who can suit themselves to any environment; one could predict safely that she would make a cheerful old maid or a proud wife and mother, whichever condition Providence might allot to her. And yet, in her own sweet maidenly way, Doris had her aspirations.

'It must be so nice to be very, very fond of some one,' she had once said to Gerda; but even this modest hint cost Doris many blushes.

Sir Godfrey looked up with cold surprise when Gerda entered the library. It was not possible for him to be more erect—his stiff old back was always rigidly upright; but there was something majestic and judicial in the way he laid down his book and regarded his grand-daughter, and there was withering sarcasm in the tone in which he said:

'I was not aware that I sent for you, Gerda.'

But Gerda was equal to the occasion, and there was no temper in her voice as she answered:

'No, grandfather, and I am afraid that you do not want to see me; but there is something that I must say to you.'

'Indeed!' and, after drawling out this word, Sir Godfrey took up his book again.

Under such circumstances her mother and Doris would have retired humbly; but Gerda had too much spirit to submit to injustice; she intended Sir Godfrey to listen to her, and if he wished to be uncivil and keep his eyes on his book, he could not protect his ears without absolute rudeness, so she went on without hesitation:

'Of course I see you are angry with me, Grand—anyone could see that, when you take so little trouble to hide it; but there is no need for you to be angry with mother, too: she wanted me to marry Gerard quite as much as you did, only, being a woman, she is a little more reasonable about it. In these sort of cases women understand each other best.'

Sir Godfrey settled his pince-nez more firmly on his nose, and glared at his grand-daughter. His finely-formed old hand trembled slightly during the process.

'Did you intrude yourself into my presence to talk about your mother?' he asked, in a cutting tone. 'With regard to yourself, I have nothing to say—nothing at all; and I beg,' somewhat hastily, 'that you will not seat yourself. When I was young, children used to stand until their parents desired them to sit down. Ah, you may smile,' as Gerda's lip curled a little. 'I am quite aware that obedience to parents, and reverence, and courtesy, have gone out of fashion—out of fashion.'

'There is no need for me to sit down. I never mind standing,' replied Gerda quietly—and, indeed, her slim young figure seemed to require no support. 'I am glad we did not live in those dark ages, Grand. Children could hardly have loved their parents in those days, if they did not venture to sit in their presence—and I think love is better than anything.'

'Oh, you think so, do you? Have you anything further to remark?'

'Yes, dear, a great deal more,' she returned cheerfully. 'I want to tell you how sorry I am to disappoint you and mother—as to poor Gerard, I am more than sorry for him—

but it cannot be helped. One must be true to one's conscience before everything. I cannot love Gerard well enough to marry him, and I was obliged to tell him so. The whole thing is between him and me—no one has any right to meddle with it, or to be angry.'

But this clear and sensible statement did not commend itself to Sir Godfrey, and a sudden twinge of gout and conscience together lent anger to his tone.

'I have every right to be angry,' he returned, bringing down his hand sharply on the table. 'Who has a better right, I should like to know? Have I not fed and clothed you from your babyhood? Is it not my roof that shelters you and your mother and sister? Is it not my bread you eat? And what return do you make me? You thwart me in my dearest wish—just for a girlish whim, or obstinacy, you refuse the finest young fellow in the world; and yet I am not to tell you to your face that you are an ungrateful girl.'

'You may tell me what you like, Grand,' returned Gerda rather sadly. 'I think I mind your hard words less than your silence—silence can be so cruelly hard; but, all the same, there seems little use in speaking such words. When two people look at the same thing from different points of view there can be no agreement. You choose to think,' she went on, after a moment, 'that I have refused Gerard out of mere perversity. How am I to persuade you to the contrary? I might talk for an hour, and you would not understand me! I think,' folding her hands together, and looking down with a graceful patience in her attitude, 'that it would be wiser and better to keep my thoughts to myself.'

'I think so, too, and that we may as well close this interview. I have nothing else to say to you, Gerda. You have disappointed me, and you cannot be surprised if I lose interest in you.'

'No,' in a slow, pondering voice. 'I ought not to be surprised when I remember Aunt Clare.' And as an uneasy flush came to Sir Godfrey's brow at the mention of his daughter's name, she continued quickly: 'There is one thing I must speak to you about—that I think you ought to hear—and that is, that Gerard talks of going away.'

'In other words, you are driving him from his home.'

'If you put it in that way, I suppose I must say "yes." But I think it is for me to go—not for him.'

'I think so, too!' and Sir Godfrey evidently meant what he said, for he hated to part with Gerard.

'May I go to Aunt Clare, then? It will be far, far better for you and Gerard, and everyone, if I go away. Mother will fret herself ill with worry; and Doris will be as miserable as possible. And I tell you frankly, Grand, that if you cannot bring yourself to forgive me, I would rather not stay at home. It is not pleasant to see the servants finding out one's little secrets—and if you will not speak to me at meal-times, of course they will know all about it.'

Sir Godfrey put up his hand to silence her.

'I have had enough of this chattering,' he said curtly. 'You may go where you like, and stay away as long as you like. This is the last word I mean to say on the subject. When Gerard comes in from the farm you may send him to me;' and this time Sir Godfrey took up his book with a determined air, and turned his back on his grand-daughter.

Gerda quietly withdrew. She had said all she wanted to say, and had obtained her end—permission to go to her Aunt Clare; the interview, unpleasant as it had been, had not depressed her. Her grandfather had said hard things to her, but she had expected him to say them; she must give him time to get over his disappointment; when she had gone away they would all settle down comfortably, and in time he would forgive her.

When she gave the message to Gerard, half an hour later, he looked at her searchingly.

'You ought not to have gone near him,' he said reproachfully. 'You must leave me to fight your battles.'

'There was something that I was obliged to ask him,' she replied apologetically. 'Thank you, Gerard, for what you have done for me. Grand is terribly angry; but I dare say it will only be for a time.'

'All the same, you ought to have left him to me;' and then Gerard went off to the library. But a little later he came out with a perturbed face, and went in search of his cousin. He found her in the morning-room sorting some music.

'Gerda,' he said abruptly, 'I want you to tell me the truth. Is it your own wish to go to Cromehurst, or is Uncle Godfrey sending you away for the purpose of keeping me here? It is impossible to find out anything, when he rambles on in that roundabout fashion. He was so incoherent that I told him at last that I should come and ask you the question. Gerda, you know there is no need for this at all. I told you yesterday that I should go away.'

'But if I really want to go?' she pleaded. 'Gerard, you don't know how I long for Aunt Clare. I am so fond of her. She is like a dear elder sister more than an aunt; and she is such a comfortable person when one is in any little trouble or difficulty. Grand made no objection when I asked him: "You may go where you like, and stay away as long as you like." Surely no permission could be more gracious;' but Gerda's joke was a little forced.

'He has got the gout coming on, and it does not improve his temper. I should advise you not to interpret his speeches too literally; he will come round before long. If it be really your own wish to go to Aunt Clare, of course I will not prevent you;' and as Gerda looked at him gratefully, he went back to his uncle.

If Gerda wished to go she should go, and he would never let her know that it was irksome for him to stay at home. To be sure, he had his duties, and perhaps nursing his uncle through an attack of gout might be one of them; but, all the same, he would rather have run up to town and seen a little life with some of his chums. It would be rather deadly staying on at the Hall with Gerda away and Sir Godfrey in a bad temper; but he would remain at his post, for all that, and by-and-by he would get his fling.

Gerda did not let the grass grow under her feet. She wrote that very night to her aunt, and two days afterwards she received the warmest invitation.

'You will be as welcome as flowers in May, darling,' wrote Mrs. Glyn. 'Your uncle Horace looked quite pleased when I gave him your message. "Let her come as soon as she likes, and stop as long as possible." Those were his very words. Want of hospitality was never one of my good husband's faults.'

Mrs. Meredith had a quiet little cry over this letter.

'Clare is my only sister,' she observed plaintively. 'It is very hard that we so seldom meet. When we were girls we were everything to each other. If only she had not married your uncle Horace!'

'I think she was quite right to marry him,' returned Gerda, with youthful brusquerie, for she always defended her aunt. 'It is not very nice for her to come here without her husband. And then Grand is not kind to her—he always finds fault with everything she says, and puts her down unmercifully. Why do you not go to Cromehurst, mother? She would love to have you.'

'Yes, Clare is a good creature,' replied Mrs. Meredith, with another sigh, and then she let the subject drop. It was not easy for her to explain to her daughter that the society of her brother-in-law was singularly distasteful to her. Clare was her own sister, and even her faults were dear to her, but there could be no comfort for her under the roof of Horace Glyn.

Gerda began her preparations as soon as she received her aunt's letter, and one evening, about a week after the dance, she put the finishing touches to a tea-cloth that she was embroidering for Mrs. Glyn, while Doris sat on the other side of the fireplace, watching her with a disconsolate face, while the well-filled trunk stood open beside her.

'I do hate you to go away, Gerda,' she said at last.

Gerda looked up quickly.

'I don't think you will be dull, Dorrie. Gerard will give you plenty of his company. Remember, you have promised to take Waif out every day; and then there are the birds and the ferns. I shall write to you very often, and you must tell me all about mother and Gerard.'

But Doris was not to be comforted so easily. She was in a lugubrious mood, and there were uneasy thoughts at work in her girlish head.

'I don't suppose Gerard will be good company,' she returned. 'He will be missing you every moment of the day. If I could only be a little more like you, Gerda! but I am such a stupid little thing, and I am sure Gerard thinks so.'

'I am sure he thinks nothing of the kind;' and Gerda laid down her work and regarded Doris's troubled face with admiring kindness.

'It seems such a pity that one cannot share one's good qualities with other people,' sighed Doris. 'If one could only grow up to—to the person one wants to please; but I could never talk as you do, Gerda; you go so dreadfully deep into things—too deep even for Gerard; but all the same he likes to listen to you. Gerard does not talk much, but he thinks a great deal.'

'How on earth did you find that out, Dorrie?' and Gerda's tone expressed extreme surprise. 'I don't believe Gerard thinks as much as—as other men.'

'You are mistaken there,' returned Doris, with a knowing nod of her head. 'You do not take the trouble to understand Gerard. He has his ideas about everything, and when he talks to me I always feel as though I should never reach his level; somehow,' continued Doris, with a painful effort to explain some truth that she dimly realized, 'you are not fair on Gerard. You make up your mind that he does not care for certain things, and he never takes the trouble to undeceive you. Gerard thinks a good deal.'

'I did not know that you were such a philosopher, Dorrie;' but Gerda's tone was dubious. 'I am not so sure that you are not growing up, after all. Do you know what I read once, and I think you are trying to express much the same thought?—"You cannot teach people to speak your language unless you can speak theirs." I think Gerard and I talk in different languages.'

'But that may not be Gerard's fault!'

'No, dear; it is far more likely to be mine. I have not a word to say against Gerard. Perhaps I shall grow wiser as I grow older, and not expect so much of other people. I know you have a horror of my quotations, but let me read you what I have written down in what I call my thought-book. They are the words of the same wise queen whose saying I repeated just now. She says: "In youth, one is a mediæval castle, with hidden nooks, secret chambers, mysterious galleries, trenches and ramparts; one becomes afterwards a modern mansion, rich, morocco-leathered, elegant, stylish, and only open to the select; and ultimately a great hall, open to the whole world—a market, a museum, or a cathedral."'

'I am afraid I do not understand all that,' observed Doris,

with a sort of despairing resignation. 'What nice talks you and Aunt Clare will have! You will not have only stupid little me for audience. I suppose Gerard and I are the modern mansions, and you are the mediæval castle, with all sorts of subterranean passages? But in my opinion the museum and the cathedral are far higher and more useful.'

'So they are, and you are not so stupid as you make yourself out to be. Come, cheer up, Dorrie! I am leaving you a grand mission—to take care of mother and Gerard. There, I have finished the border of the tea-cloth. Will not Aunt Clare think it lovely? And Uncle Horace will rebuke us both. He will tell me that I should have been better employed in visiting the poor and teaching the orphans, and he will rail against Aunt Clare for her love of finery. Now will you help me shut my trunk, and then, as it is late, we had better go to bed.'

Gerda was to start early the following morning, and Gerard and Doris were to accompany her to the station. Just before the carriage came round she went into the library to bid Sir Godfrey good-bye. He received her rather coldly, and her kiss met with slight response.

'I suppose you will send your love to Aunt Clare, Grand?' she asked as she stood by him a moment. She quite understood that she was not yet forgiven, and expected no special softness from him; but he was old and ailing, and she could make allowances for him.

'Oh yes, you may give her my love. I suppose she will come and see us sometime this summer, if she can tear herself away from her husband? She may bring one or two of the children with her if she wishes to do so; but your mother will settle all that. There, I hear the carriage. I must beg that you do not keep the horses waiting a moment —not one moment;' but Gerda still lingered.

'Won't you say something kind to me before I go, Grand? Are you still so very angry with me?'

'You have disappointed me,' was his sole reply; but he did not add that it was not in his nature to brook such disappointment.

Gerda looked at him for a moment; then she smoothed back the gray hair from the high, narrow forehead, and kissed him gently between his eyes.

'Good-bye, dear, you will not always be hard on me,' she answered; 'at least, I hope not;' and then she went in quest of her mother.

She was rather silent during the drive, and Gerard talked more to Doris than to her. But as he settled her in the train, and arranged her rug for her, he said in a low voice:

'You will not stay very long away, Gerda?'

'I do not know; I have not thought about it,' she answered; but as she spoke a curious feeling crept over her—a sudden sense of distance and separation; a strange foreboding that she had reached some turning in her life. She was going away from them, but when and how would she return? The question seemed to oppress her. 'I have not thought about it,' she faltered. 'Good-bye, Gerard; take care of them all for me.' The train moved as she spoke, and he nodded and stepped back on the platform.

Gerda looked at them both rather wistfully—at Gerard's strong, well-built figure and grave face, and then at Doris, as she stood closely beside him. The faint wintry sunshine seemed to envelop them in its transient brightness as they stood together.

'Why should it not be?' she said to herself—'if he only knew, Doris would make him very happy; but,' with a sigh, 'I suppose he will never find that out for himself.'

CHAPTER XIV

ST. JUDE'S VICARAGE

'We live with other men, and to other men ; neither with nor to ourselves.'—CLARENDON.

'The wavering mind is a base property.'—EURIPIDES.

THE parish of St. Jude's, Cromehurst, where the Rev. Horace Glyn had a cure of souls, was not in the town itself, but in the out-lying suburb that had sprung up in mushroom fashion during the last few years, and of which the cemetery was the nucleus and centre.

It was a somewhat straggling parish, and embraced all sorts and conditions of men.

The new roads that branched off from the church in all directions, with their substantial, comfortable houses, were inhabited by respectable business men, who went up to town by the fast early trains, and returned to the bosom of their family in the evening; but on the other side of the cemetery was a poorer neighbourhood, where a motley class, ranging from small shopkeepers and artisans to gutter merchants and flower-girls, took up their abode. At first sight it would appear to the casual observer that the people living in those roomy cottages, with their little plots of garden ground, must be fairly well-to-do, and that no fell grip of poverty had made itself felt in the roads rejoicing in the euphonious names of Acacia and Elm-tree Roads and Hazelbeech Gardens; but this would be drawing an erroneous conclusion.

The heart of man is deceitful and desperately wicked.

and not even plenty of space and elbow-room, abundance of fresh water and fine air, could transform the improvident idler into the industrious workman, or lure the drunkard from the public-house, out of which he reeled night after night to his home. Human nature is the same everywhere, and no paradise is free from the trail of the serpent. Even in Hazelbeech Gardens slatternly mothers sent out their unkempt, pale-faced children to play in the gutters, until the hand of authority swept them off to parish and board schools. Therefore was the soul of the Rev. Horace Glyn vexed within him as he walked down the wide roads, or exchanged greetings with a loiterer or two. 'What could they want more?' he asked himself. There was abundance of work for all; no one had intercepted the sweet current of air that blew freshly on them from the open country; no water could be purer; no parish so prodigal of wise, self-supporting charities. The coal-club, the provident fund, the boot and shoe fund, were all flourishing and well sustained, and yet vice and want skulked behind some of those walls; the unrepentant prodigal still fed on husks, and the seven devils had not yet departed out of the Magdalene.

The church of St. Jude's was in all respects what a church should be, but the Vicarage was felt to be a failure. The funds had been low, and the builder's estimates had been so sadly curtailed that anything like ornamentation had been clearly impossible.

Mrs. Glyn's heart had sunk within her as she looked round the rooms, with their barrack-like spaciousness and general barrenness of detail; and while her husband was descanting delightfully on the airy situation, the capital ventilation, and the cheerful view from the windows, she was wondering how she could ever give them a comfortable, homelike aspect.

'The papers are so ugly, Horace,' she could not help saying at last.

'You will soon get used to them, my dear,' he returned encouragingly; 'and, after all, there is very little ground for complaint: the proportions of the rooms are excellent, and there are plenty of them—we shall not be crowded for want of space.' And Mr. Glyn looked so supremely satisfied that she had not the courage to damp him.

Poor Mrs. Glyn! she had an innate love of the beautiful, and those cheap glaring wall-papers haunted her like a nightmare. If only Horace would have allowed her to change the drawing-room one! she thought, but the mere idea had so shocked him that she had been reduced to a discomfited silence. Mrs. Glyn was a high-spirited woman, and her will was a strong one. But her husband's was far stronger; in any such contest she was compelled to yield. There had been times during their married life when she had pleaded earnestly with him for something that she thought necessary to her own or her children's comfort; but though he would listen to her with patience, and give good heed to all her reasoning, the result had always been the same. When she had finished, he would tell her quietly that the thing was impossible, and that it was wrong of her to wish it—that it was a wife's duty to be guided by her husband, and that she should try on all occasions to think with him.

'I am quite sure no wife was ever more submissive to her husband than I am to you, Horace,' she had said once, when his reproof had been more stinging than usual.

'I have never complained,' was his imperturbable answer. 'On the contrary, I believe I have often praised you, and I am quite sure that on this point you will be guided by me;' and such was the power of the man, and so great was her belief in him, that she had invariably yielded to him, sorrowfully, and with much inward reluctance; but still the victory had been his. Perhaps if she had known how he loved and honoured her for her womanly compliance, she might have gone away more comforted; but he was a man of few words, and outward demonstration was by no means easy to him.

The Vicar of St. Jude's prided himself on belonging to no special party. In the language of the great Apostle, he would be all things to all men; he would wear no distinctive badge; neither High Church, Low Church, nor Broad Church should claim him. 'His creed is the Glynian Creed,' an undergraduate was once heard to say; 'he has a platform of his own, and the name of his party is Horace Glyn.' But this severe criticism only grazed the truth. There was nothing colourless or obscure in Horace Glyn's pastoral teaching. On the contrary, he held strong views on all subjects, and there was marked originality and much depth

of thought in those short, concise sermons that were preached Sunday after Sunday at St. Jude's. Perhaps his chief defect lay in his unmitigated contempt for the small aims and narrower views of the puerile souls around him; and he was specially hard on the honest business men who composed part of his congregation. For them he seemed to have no pity or scruple; for their sakes he would utter the most startling paradoxes: for in one breath he would tell them that work was the salt and savour of life, and the next he would reproach them with their love of greed, their absorbing preoccupation with the perishing things of this life; and he was always so terribly in earnest that many a slumbering conscience was roused and pricked into uneasiness.

And there was another thing that added weight to his influence—he was so absolutely true, and he so evidently believed every word he spoke. At times there was something almost pathetic in the way he strove to live up to his conviction, and when he failed to do so he would accuse himself almost bitterly of his want of faithfulness.

With all these virtues, it must still be acknowledged that Horace Glyn was more respected than loved, and he was regarded even by his children with a species of awe; his affection for his wife and children bordered on intensity, and in his own heart he would plead guilty to over-much tenderness, but he seldom allowed them to perceive this. The small every-day jokes, the light, innocent play of nonsense and repartee, that make family life so pleasant, were missing at St. Jude's Vicarage; the weight of the paternal gravity was too severe a pressure on the youthful spirits; and it was often remarked by visitors how quiet and well-behaved the children were in their father's presence.

'You should see them with me,' Mrs. Glyn would answer. 'I think they keep all their nonsense for my private ear. Horace is so very grave, and then he is often so preoccupied, and they are afraid of troubling him. They know nothing ever troubles me; I think I am a child still, I am so fond of noise and play.'

It was towards evening when Gerda and her luggage were driven up to the door of St. Jude's Vicarage. She was weary and benumbed with her long, cold journey, but as the door was flung open, before the cabman could descend

from his box, and she saw the stream of warm light, and Mrs. Glyn's tall figure, with the neat maid-servant behind her, she forgot her fatigue, and ran eagerly up the steps.

'Oh, Aunt Clare, how nice it is to see you again!'

'You are late, dearest. Bessie and I were just beginning to get anxious. Oh, how cold you are! Do not stand in this bitter draught another moment. Lydia will look after the luggage;' and so saying, Mrs. Glyn led the way to the bright, comfortable drawing-room.

A girl about sixteen was sitting reading by the fire, with a tabby cat curled up in her lap. She rose at once as the visitor entered the room.

'Why, Bessie, how you have grown!' exclaimed Gerda, kissing her. 'You are quite a young lady now.'

Bessie blushed and looked pleased. She was a fair, pretty-looking girl, with gentle, retiring manners; but she was evidently very shy and unformed. She drew the easy-chair closer to the fire, and looked at her mother as though for further directions.

'Yes, dear, you may go and bring Gerda a cup of hot tea. Make it yourself, Bessie, for Rebecca is busy;' and Bessie at once left the room.

'Bessie is growing very pretty,' observed Gerda; 'but I see she is as quiet as ever. So the children are away, Aunt Clare; I am so sorry not to see them. I shall miss my romps with Janie and Nora; and then there is Willie;' and here she stopped and looked at her aunt a little anxiously.

Mrs. Glyn's face grew grave.

'They are spending the remainder of the holidays with their Aunt Emma—I think I told you so in my letter—and Willie will go straight to school from there. Of course I was sorry about it, but Horace seemed to think it was best; but I see so little of Willie now;' and then Mrs. Glyn sighed and changed the subject by questioning Gerda about her journey.

Gerda could have found it in her heart to echo her aunt's sigh. There was more in these few words than met the ear. Horace Glyn's eldest sister was by no means beloved by her sister-in-law. Mrs. Harding was a bustling, managing woman, with clear, worldly views, and she had some influence with her brother. She had married a man much

older than herself, and to make matters worse in Mrs. Glyn's eyes, Mr. Harding had a large retail business, and 'the shop,' as she called it, was a bitter humiliation to her.

It was in vain that her husband represented to her that nothing could be more respectable than Mrs. Harding's position. Clare only shuddered at the word 'respectability.' To be sure, her sister-in-law had a handsome house at Highgate, and drove in her own carriage; but even this failed to give Mrs. Glyn satisfaction. Mr. Harding might be respectable, but in her eyes he was hopelessly vulgar. He had a loud, joking manner, which always offended her, and even his good-nature and his liberality to her children could elicit no commendation from her lips. And there was another thing that had widened the breach between the sisters-in-law: Mrs. Harding, with her shrewd common-sense, often influenced her brother, and it was owing to her and her husband Willie had had that presentation to Christ's Hospital.

The greatest sorrow of Clare's life had been the loss of her second child—a beautiful boy who had died of croup in his third year; but it may be said that the bitterest humiliation she had ever suffered was when she first saw her youngest born attired in the quaint mediæval dress that has so strangely lingered into the nineteenth century.

But it was in vain that she had striven with her husband in a hot, tearful argument that had driven him for once to anger.

'Horace, I cannot bear it,' she had said to him. 'This is Emma's doing; she has harped on this ever since Willie was born; but you have no right to listen to her and not think of your wife's feelings. Why do you not teach him yourself if you cannot afford to send him to school?' for as yet the living of St. Jude's had not been offered to him.

'You are talking at random, Clare,' returned her husband coldly, for this false pride, as he called it, made him less patient with her than usual. 'How am I to teach Willie when my time is not my own? Would you have me defraud the sick and dying that Willie may have his Latin lessons? Is this your idea of a curate's duty?'

'I will teach him myself, then—I will, indeed, Horace!' she exclaimed eagerly. 'I know a little Latin even now, and I can learn more. Let me have him for a year or two

until we grow a little richer; he is my boy as well as yours, and I have a right to be consulted.'

'But you have no right to lose your temper,' with a disapproving glance at her flushed face, 'and least of all with your husband.' Then, as she burst into tears, he relented and took her hand. 'My love, this is absolutely wrong and foolish. Why cannot you trust me to do the best I can for Willie? Do you think that I would not much rather send him to Rugby or Harrow? I was a Rugby boy myself. But in our position—with all these children to educate, and on small means—there should be no room for pride. I have done all I can for Walter, but there is nothing to spare for Willie; and when Antony promised to secure me a presentation to Christ's Hospital I dared not refuse it.'

'It is all Emma,' she returned in despair; 'she has more influence with you than I have, Horace. I have seen that for a long time.'

'Is it necessary to wound me with such speeches?' he asked reproachfully. 'How have I ever failed to you, Clare, except by loving you too well?' Then, at the break of tenderness in his voice, she crept closer to him.

'Please forgive me,' she whispered; 'but I am so unhappy, Horace. If we could only think alike about this; if you would put yourself in my place for once! Think of what my father and Honoria will say! I have so often heard father call it "a charity school for gentlemen."'

'True,' he returned, with a curl of his lip, 'and Charles Lamb and Samuel Taylor Coleridge were charity boys. But what of that, Clare? Why should not our Willie follow their footsteps? Has not Christ's Hospital turned out brave gentlemen and learned scholars? My dear, try to be sensible. If Willie's yellow stockings offend your eyes, that is a small grievance weighed in the balance against more solid advantages. You have often blamed Emma, in my hearing, for her worldly motives; but take care that you are free yourself from the same taint. Such pride as yours is only a subtler form of worldliness. Do not let us argue any more upon a foregone conclusion. I have already made up my mind, and the thing must be done.'

But though, as usual, Horace Glyn had his way, in his heart he was very sorry that necessity had obliged him to

inflict this humiliation on his wife; as far as his conscience permitted him, he would willingly have pleased her, and his anger had been roused by her inability to perceive this conflict that was for ever going on between his inclination and duty. Not that yellow stockings were so odious to him, for nature had not endowed him with a fine cultured taste—he was a robust Philistine of the old type; nevertheless, he loved his wife dearly, and he hated to see a cloud on her bright face, and to know that he himself had brought it there made him thoroughly unhappy.

Gerda knew all about this trouble. Willie had been at Christ's Hospital for three years now, but his mother still secretly lamented the fact; and though she had long ago forgiven her husband, the breach between her and her sister-in-law had never been healed.

Her husband did not trouble himself to effect a reconciliation. He was wise enough to perceive that the natures of the two women were too dissimilar to render harmony possible. He never pressed his wife to accompany him to Highgate; neither did he insist on her receiving his sister; he left all that to time and chance. But he took care that his children did not fail in their duty to their aunt; and as Mrs. Harding had no children of her own, and was fond of the society of young people, she frequently invited her nephews and nieces to stay with her.

The twins and Willie always enjoyed their visits to The Briars. They liked driving into town with Aunt Emma, and watching her numerous purchases. Then Uncle Harding would take them to the pantomime; or they would go to the Zoological Gardens, or to Madame Tussaud's, or other places of amusement, under the care of a gray old clerk. But these visits were less relished by Walter and Bessie; and Bessie, in particular, grew silent and home-sick under her aunt's wing.

Gerda sipped her hot tea, and basked pleasantly in the warmth while she answered Mrs. Glyn's eager questions.

'You are looking thinner, Aunt Clare,' she said at last.

But Mrs. Glyn only laughed, and disclaimed this. She was a very graceful-looking woman, and many people thought her extremely handsome, though her hair was tinged with gray and there were lines under the frank, smiling eyes, but in her husband's eyes she had never ceased to be lovely.

'Yes, indeed, you are thinner,' repeated Gerda tenderly. 'You work too hard, Aunt Clare. I mean to tell Uncle Horace so when I see him. I am right, am I not, Bessie?' as the girl looked up rather quickly at this.

'Hold your tongue, Bessie,' returned her mother good-humouredly. 'I will not have you two conspiring against my peace. One master is enough for any woman.'

'Mother always works too hard,' observed Bessie in a low voice; 'and she does more than ever now that she teaches Janie and Nora'

'Oh, Aunt Clare!' in quite a shocked tone of voice.

But Mrs. Glyn only shook her head reproachfully at Bessie.

'Mouse! I am surprised at you,' for this was Bessie's sobriquet in the family. 'Gerda will give me no peace now. No, you shall not speak; I must explain matters. You see, since Miss Hall left us we have not had a governess. Your Uncle Horace hates schools for girls; and, really, Walter is likely to cost us so much that we could hardly afford to send them, even though Mrs. Vincent's terms are certainly very moderate; so I suggested that I should teach them myself, and your uncle thought this such a good plan that I have done so ever since Michaelmas—and I assure you that I like the work immensely.'

'Yes, but it is too much for you, with the house and all your parish work; how can Uncle Horace allow you to overtax your strength? You mentioned Mrs. Vincent just now—I seem to have heard that name before.'

'She is Dr. Lyall's sister—such a charming person! Even your Uncle Horace can find no fault with her, though he has such a high standard for people. By-the-bye, Gerda, you have become quite intimate with Pamela and her brother. You know, they are both great favourites of mine. I shall want to hear all about everything—the ice accident, and the party, and—and other things'—and here she looked meaningly at her niece's averted face—'but we shall have plenty of time for all that to-morrow. Let us go upstairs now, and then you can rest and refresh yourself before dinner;' and as Gerda approved of this suggestion, Mrs. Glyn led the way upstairs to the room that had been prepared for the guest.

CHAPTER XV

TWILIGHT CONFIDENCES

There will be always cross-lights troubling the earnest soul.'—
LORD HOUGHTON.

MRS. GLYN had evidently made up her mind that all awkward topics should be avoided that first evening. Her tired guest was to be warmed, welcomed and refreshed; she was to be petted and made to feel at home. There would be plenty of time for talk presently, when Gerda should have recovered from the fatigue of her journey.

Late dinner was an innovation at St. Jude's Vicarage. Mrs. Glyn, who knew how her husband suffered from the effects of the hurried mid-day meal, had been urgent with him to permit himself this one indulgence; but, as usual, her arguments had not prevailed. She had found an unexpected ally, however, in Dr. Lyall, who had been called in to prescribe for the over-worked Vicar.

'Your digestion is seriously impaired,' he had said to him; 'you have been in the habit of snatching a hurried meal in the midst of your parish work.—If you value your husband's health, Mrs. Glyn, let him have a comfortable dinner at seven o'clock; a light luncheon is all that he ought to have at mid-day.'

Mr. Glyn had not openly rebelled against his doctor's wishes, but when he had been left alone with his wife he had looked very solemn.

'It will double our weekly expenses, Clare,' he observed with a grave face; but on this point his wife reassured him.

'I think you are wrong, dear,' she returned gently; 'it will not make all that difference. Let us try for a week or so, by way of experiment;' and this time she was allowed to carry her point. Mrs. Glyn was an excellent manager, and after a few demurs from her husband, that grew fainter and fainter, the late dinner became a permanent institution at the Vicarage.

Mr. Glyn's health had improved under this régime, but his ascetic soul had secret qualms of conscience, and from time to time he explained laboriously to a chance guest that he was unwillingly carrying out his doctor's prescriptions. 'No man should be a slave to his own appetite,' he would say, as he carved the slices of roast beef. 'I am not indifferent to creature comforts, but I like to feel that I can do without them'—and in all justice it must be owned that no man could so well dispense with luxuries.

When Gerda returned to the drawing-room she found Mr. Glyn in possession of the hearthrug. He was holding forth to his family on some point that had come under his notice, but as she entered the room he stopped at once and greeted her most cordially. Mr. Glyn was a striking-looking man; he was not tall, but his erect figure and a certain fine carriage of the head gave him an air of unusual dignity. His features were good, and there was a keenness and brightness in his eyes which struck terror into evildoers, and it was difficult indeed for anyone with an uneasy conscience to meet without flinching that clear penetrating gaze.

But at times when things went well with him, and he found himself alone with his wife and children, there would be a softness and sweetness of expression that made up for his want of demonstration; and as he kissed Gerda, and asked her kindly about her journey, it was evident that this mood was on him now.

'Why, Walter, I should hardly have known you!' exclaimed Gerda, as a tall, good-looking young fellow shook hands with her, and she drew her finger significantly across her upper lip.

'You did not know that Walter was cultivating a moustache,' observed his father dryly; but he was secretly proud of his son's hirsute ornament. 'He is afraid of looking too young for an undergraduate—eh, Walter?' But Walter

only reddened, and exchanged a quick glance with his mother.

'I suppose your aunt has told you that we hope to send Walter to Oxford next term?' continued Mr. Glyn; but his wife interrupted him.

'No, indeed, Horace. I have told Gerda nothing yet; home politics are not for tired travellers, and Gerda looks extremely fatigued. Ah, there is the dinner-bell;' and then the conversation was suspended until the Vicar had said grace.

Mr. Glyn was determined to make himself pleasant; he asked after Sir Godfrey and every member of the family with a fine assumption of interest.

'Sir Godfrey wears well, but he must be getting old,' he observed, as though he and Sir Godfrey were the best of friends: 'he is a fine specimen of the old country gentleman.'

'Grandfather was seventy-five last birthday,' returned Gerda; 'he is very proud of the fact, and is always reminding us of it.' Then Mrs. Glyn sighed, and her husband looked at her and proceeded to talk of Gerard.

'He leads rather a useless existence, I am afraid,' he remarked with some severity; 'shooting, and fishing, and cricket, can hardly fill up a man's life.' Then Gerda, with some embarrassment, tried to defend her cousin.

'Gerard is never idle,' she said quietly; 'you have no idea how busy he is from morning to night, and he helps Grand so much too: he keeps his accounts for him, and does a good deal of his business. Grand does not really think himself old, but he gets dreadfully muddled sometimes; and then Gerard makes everything straight for him.'

'I suppose Hamlyn will be getting a wife soon,' observed Mr. Glyn, for he was ignorant of the family scheme. Then Gerda blushed violently and held her peace, while Mrs. Glyn came to her rescue.

'I suppose it will be his duty to marry some day,' she said in a matter-of-fact tone; 'but there is plenty of time for that. Gerda, I wish you would tell us a little about your accident. Dr. Lyall refused to say a word when he was here on Tuesday; by-the-bye, I told him that you were coming, and he said his sister would be so pleased. I am

glad you like Pamela—is she not an amusing little person?—only I regret to say your uncle does not admire her.'

'I am sorry to hear that, Uncle Horace. I have taken such a fancy to Miss Lyall; she is so thoroughly original, and says such clever things.'

Then Mr. Glyn gave an eloquent dissenting shrug which seemed to amuse his wife.

'Ask him why he does not like her, Gerda!' But Mr. Glyn did not wait to be questioned.

'In the first place I deny her originality. It is quite true that she does not talk in the usual conventional way—she has evidently cultivated the art of saying odd, out-of-the-way things; she wishes to appear clever, but in reality she is flighty.'

'I do not agree with you, Uncle Horace.'

'Neither do I, Gerda; he is dreadfully hard on Pamela. there is never any peace when he is in the room with her; somehow she rubs him up the wrong way.'

'She should talk more sensibly,' he returned severely. 'What do you think she said the other day, Gerda? I was talking about her sister—ah, poor thing! I forgot that you do not know her; but she is a most pleasing person. I was saying something civil about her, and Miss Lyall suddenly began abusing her: she did not know why I always praised her sister, I was not generally so easily satisfied with people. Hester was well enough, but she was a very ordinary person; her conscientiousness amounted to a fault—she hated a nervous conscience. What a ridiculous idea for a girl to enunciate—a nervous conscience! And actually your aunt only laughed!'

'I laughed at your horrified face, Horace. Of course, Pamela only said it to get a rise out of you. She told me afterwards that there was nothing she loved better. "He looks so splendid when he is angry," she finished.' But this compliment was received by the Vicar with marked disfavour, and Mrs. Glyn, with her usual tact and good-nature, changed the subject.

'I think Gerda is wonderfully improved. She seems to have grown, somehow,' remarked Mr. Glyn, an hour or two later, when their guest had retired.

It was the hour that his wife loved best. The rest of the

household were asleep—the long, hard working day was over; but the Vicar still sat by his study fire with his open book before him. Clare always sat opposite to him with her knitting or mending-basket beside her. She knew that in spite of his silence her husband liked to see her there, and at times he would lay down his book or push aside his papers, and tell her the day's troubles or the thoughts that were passing through his mind. And then it would seem to the tired, happy wife as though heaven and earth were very near together, and life a great mystery and sacrament of love. At such times the hesitations and limitations of a difficult, complex nature seemed laid aside like a cloak, and the real Horace Glyn stood revealed to his wife's eyes in his full strength and meaning. 'No one knows him as I do,' she would think; and then she would declare to herself, with womanly inconsistency, that he was altogether perfect.

When Mr. Glyn made this remark about Gerda, Clare's eyes glistened with pleasure, and she laid down her work.

'She's a darling!' she returned enthusiastically. 'I always told you she was a fine creature; but oh, Horace! what made you talk so much of Gerard Hamlyn?'

'Is there any reason why I should not talk of him, my dear?' And Mr. Glyn looked at his wife rather keenly.

'She was very much embarrassed when you mentioned his name. I do not know why you should be kept in ignorance, Horace. Honoria wrote to me very fully about him. My father has set his heart on his marrying Gerda, and it appears that Gerard is really in love with her, but Gerda will not have him.'

'Do you mean that she has actually refused him?'

'Yes, indeed. And Honoria tells me that everything is so uncomfortable that the poor child is glad to take refuge with us. I think you ought to know this, Horace, but I have had no opportunity of telling you.'

'Certainly I ought to know it, but, unless Gerda herself speaks to me, you may be sure that I shall not mention the subject. A young girl's confidence is only given to one of her own sex, and unless she has need of priestly counsel she will not speak to me, neither shall I expect her to do so. But, Clare, let her know, if possible, that she has my warmest sympathy. Tell her, if you will, that I honour her for not

giving away her heart lightly to this young man, and that she is welcome to stay here as long as she likes.' And Mr. Glyn spoke with decision and energy.

'Thank you, dear; you are very good! I will certainly tell Gerda this when we talk the matter over together; but, Horace, do you know, I feel rather sorry for Gerard. He is such a nice fellow, and Honoria says he is thoroughly in love with her.'

'It will do him no harm,' returned her husband. 'And, after all, the question is for the girl herself to decide. You did not want anyone to help you make up your mind, and you were not older than Gerda when you accepted me.' And a certain softness came over Horace Glyn's features as he remembered how his faithful Clare had given up all for his sake.

'No, Horace, and I have never repented my decision.' And then for a moment a sacred silence fell between the wife and husband.

When the Vicar spoke again it was on a different subject.

'I went to Daintree Road this afternoon, my dear.'

Then Mrs. Glyn roused from her musing fit.

'Did you see Hester?'

'No, she was busy with some music pupils, so I went into the studio. As usual, I found Vincent reading a French novel, with an empty coffee-cup beside him. Upon my word, Clare, I should enjoy horsewhipping the fellow!'

'I quite believe you. Poor Mr. Vincent would have scant mercy at your hands. I suppose Ray was with him?'

'Poor little dear! she was fast asleep on the rug, and he had covered her over with his velvet painting-coat. He apologized for not rising, for fear of waking her, and then he showed me how she had dropped asleep cuddling his boot.'

'I think the best point about him is his love for that child,' observed Clare, secretly touched by this moving picture.

'Do you call it love when he is too lazy to work for her?' returned her husband energetically. 'Of course it was the old excuse—want of light and absence of the model. There were half a dozen pictures, in all stages of progress, and he was sitting by the fire reading Zola.'

'He is very unsatisfactory, certainly. Poor dear Hester! my heart bleeds for her. Did you ask after the boys?'

'There was nothing else to talk about. He says Lyall is paying their school bills. Harry is really a very clever, intelligent lad, and takes after his mother; but Philip is slower, and does not seem very brilliant. Would you believe it, Clare, Vincent began inveighing against day-schools for the sons of gentlemen! "They will mix with all the cads of the neighbourhood," he said. "I believe my butcher's son is in the same class with Harry." But I cut him short by asking him who was to send them to a public school; and then he was obliged to confess that he did not see his way to do it. "No one cares about art nowadays," he remarked. I got up and took my leave after that. If I had stayed longer, I should only have quarrelled with him. One must keep the peace, for his wife's sake.'

'Yes, indeed,' agreed his wife, with a sigh; and then she put aside her work-basket, and reminded her husband of the lateness of the hour.

Mrs. Glyn's morning was fully occupied, and Gerda saw little of her until luncheon; so she sat reading in the rocking-chair beside the fire, while Walter prepared his Greek for his tutor, and Bessie wrote out her French translation, or drew in silence. Bessie was completing her education in a somewhat desultory fashion. She explained to Gerda that she and her mother still read history and English literature together, and that she went twice a week to Mrs. Vincent for French and drawing.

'They have a very good French governess, and, of course, Mr. Vincent teaches drawing,' she went on; 'and when father is not too busy, he does a little Euclid and Latin with me.'

'Mouse is a sort of mendicant pupil,' observed Walter, thrusting his finger through his hair. 'She is thankful for scraps, and gleans stray crumbs of wisdom. Did you ever hear of a girl's education being carried on in such a fashion? She and mother read Macaulay and Green in corners. I am always finding them at it.'

'I am sure I work hard enough,' returned Bessie, much hurt at this flippant speech, 'and mother knows more than most people. I do not know why you always laugh at me, Walter!' and the tears came into Bessie's eyes.

But Walter only laughed again, and shrugged his shoulders.

'Of course a mouse lives on crumbs,' he observed in a teasing voice; but Gerda shook her head at him. She was very fond of Walter, but he must be kept in order. Bessie was a dear good child, and she should not be teased.

'Go on with your Greek, sir,' she said authoritatively, 'and leave poor Bessie alone. What is this that I hear about your going to Oxford? Do you mean that your father can afford to send you there?' and as Gerda spoke, a remembrance of Willie's yellow stockings and thick shoes came to her.

'I never said that he could afford it,' returned Walter rather shortly, and becoming suddenly grave.

'Mother says we shall all be dreadfully stinted,' observed Bessie timidly; but Walter gave her a warning kick.

'You must be very pleased at the prospect,' continued Gerda, in an interested voice, for she and her aunt had often talked for hours about Walter's future career. Clare's son was doubly dear to her since the death of her second boy, and in spite of his reticence the Vicar was very proud of the fine-grown, manly-looking youth who had his mother's eyes.

'I think, if I were a boy, Oxford would be the summit of my ambition,' went on Gerda softly, as she looked out at the chill wintry sunlight. 'I saw it once. It was like a dream of beauty, with its spires and gray old colleges, and its Martyrs' memorial.'

But there was no answering gleam in Walter's eyes.

'I was never there,' he returned shortly. And then he put his elbows on the table, and went back to his Euripides. Gerda felt vaguely that Walter had somehow changed. He was older, and looked more of a man, but he had lost some of his boyish frankness. Perhaps he was busy, and disliked interruption. So she took up her book again.

After luncheon, Mrs. Glyn suggested that they should take their work into the drawing-room. 'It is a raw, chilly afternoon,' she observed; 'and unless you care for a walk, I should gladly be excused.' And as Gerda protested that she was in a lazy mood, and should much enjoy a chat by the fireside, they were soon settled cosily with their work;

and long before the twilight had arrived, Mrs. Glyn was in full possession of Gerda's secret.

'I have been so longing to tell you, Aunt Clare,' she finished. 'I have been so sure of your sympathy all this time. At home they are all for Gerard. No one thinks of me at all in the matter. They think Gerard has only to ask for anything that he wants. Even Doris takes his part.'

'What would you say if I were to take his part too?'

'I should feel as though my last comfort had failed me. Aunt Clare, you are not serious—you do not really think that I ought to marry Gerard?'

'Does it matter so much what I think? Your Uncle Horace is on your side, Gerda. He thinks it very wrong that any such pressure should have been put upon you. As far as that goes, I agree with him. No one has a right to give an opinion in a question of marrying. There are only two people to be considered.'

'Then please do not tell me that you take Gerard's part.'

'No, darling, I will not tell you that—not seriously. But all the same, I am very sorry for Gerard. He is rather a favourite of mine, and I do not like him to be disappointed.'

'Then most certainly you are taking his part.'

'If you tell me that, I will say no more about my sorrow for him. On the contrary, I will put myself in your place, and try and see with your eyes. But you must explain yourself more clearly.'

'Some things are not easy to explain,' returned Gerda sadly. 'They will not resolve themselves into words. Aunt Clare, when you married Uncle Horace, did you feel that, though you loved him, that part of you—your best part—would be starved and left out in the cold?'

'No, child, certainly not. Every thought seemed to belong to him. Do you suppose a divided allegiance would satisfy a man like your uncle?'

'That is for you to say. But, of course, I know all that you gave up for Uncle Horace. If I loved anyone, I would do just the same. I think I would go to the end of the world for such a one. But not with Gerard—no, certainly not with Gerard.'

'Do you mean that you could not trust him?'

'No, Aunt Clare, that is not my meaning. Of course I could trust him wholly. But with all my affection for Gerard, how could I go to the ends of the earth with a man who could not speak my language—who could think none of my thoughts?'

'Ah, I understand you now. There is no part of my mind, as well as my heart, that is not open to my husband. That is a great deal for an old married woman to say.'

'Perhaps so. But, in my opinion, every woman should be able to say the same. People make such terrible mistakes, and they forget that it is for life.'

'You are quite right, dearest. A woman should look up to her husband—not beyond him, or over his head. It is this fatal mistake that has wrecked Hester Vincent's life. She has attained the full stature of her womanhood, and Mr. Vincent is a mere boy still. She has grown and developed since their marriage, but he is just what he always was. They are not on the same plane.'

'Yes, I see. That is very sad. But, Aunt Clare, just let me say one thing before we close the subject. It makes me so happy to know that one person understands me.'

'Then you may be perfectly content. But, Gerda, surely I know the wearer of that red dress. I am afraid our cosy chat must be brought to an abrupt conclusion. Yes, that is Pamela's knock—she is your first visitor. Just stir the fire into a blaze, that we may be able to see one another's faces.'

CHAPTER XVI

PAMELA

'Do not marry a woman whose mouth droops at the corners. Even were the mouth a cherry you would find the fruit bitter.'—CARMEN SYLVA.

'AM I interrupting you, dear people?' exclaimed Pamela, in her usual abrupt fashion, as she advanced into the room. Pamela never came into a room as other people did; she entered with a sudden rush, like a miniature whirlwind. In a moment an energizing influence made itself felt; conversation might be at a low ebb, but in a second it was fanned, reinvigorated, stirred into fresh life and interest. 'You were talking secrets,' she continued, darting an inquisitive glance at Gerda's hot face as she spoke. 'Shall I go away, Mrs. Glyn?—I hate to spoil sport; my good-nature has been my bane all my life—say the word, and I will vanish—dissolve into space!' But Pamela's little feet were planted very firmly on the hearthrug as she spoke.

'Nonsense, Lady-bird! you will just stay where you are,' returned Mrs. Glyn, wheeling up a cosy-looking chair towards the fire. 'I always call her Lady-bird, Gerda, when she wears that red and black dress. So you have come to call on my niece, Pamela? That is very pretty behaviour on your part.'

'It is one of my virtuous days,' returned Pamela placidly. 'I knew when I got out of bed this morning that I should feel good for the remainder of the day: it is rather a nice feeling while it lasts,' she continued meditatively; 'it is a pity that it is so evanescent. So you have come to Crome-

hurst?' she went on, turning to Gerda. 'I had no idea we should meet so soon;' and her curious, questioning glance made Gerda uncomfortable.

'Yes, it is very soon,' she returned quickly; 'but I had no more idea than you had, Miss Lyall. I always intended to pay Aunt Clare a visit in the summer, but I suddenly saw reason to alter my plans.'

'Indeed!' drawled Pamela. 'Well, never mind the reasons, they are no business of mine—everyone has a right to his or her own mysteries. I am very glad to see you, Miss Meredith; we got on very well together at Chesterton, and I know we shall soon be fast friends. You are looking paler and thinner; I suppose that has something to do with the mysteries, too.'

'Pamela,' observed Mrs. Glyn significantly, 'if you are going to make invidious remarks, I shall not ask you to take off your hat and jacket and spend the evening with us.'

'I could not do it under any circumstances, madam. I always call Mrs. Glyn "madam" when she presumes to lecture your humble servant. I have a particular engagement this evening.'

'I suppose Mr. Vincent is coming?'

'I see no reason to deny the fact. Yes, Derrick is coming to dinner; but as it is by his own invitation, not mine, I will throw him over if you like.'

'You will do nothing of the kind, Lady-bird!'

And then Pamela laughed mischievously.

'I have half a mind to do it—only it would be punishing myself as well as Derrick; and as I have not seen him for five weeks, I have so much to say to him. I don't believe we shall have a pleasant evening, as Alick is in a bad temper. We quarrelled at breakfast-time this morning.'

'Oh, indeed! I understood this was one of your virtuous days, Pamela?'

But Pamela took this little rebuff quite sweetly.

'Exactly so; and that proves how wrong and unreasonable Alick must be. Would you believe it, Mrs. Glyn: he scolded me dreadfully just because I had given our cook warning!'

'You have given Rebecca warning?'

'Certainly I have!' in a tone of indignant innocence

'Alick has been complaining lately that the joints are overdone. He has spoken several times about it; and I talked very seriously to Rebecca. With all her good points, Rebecca is a little short in her temper; and, I am sorry to say, she answered me very rudely, and then I told her that she must go. And now Jane has given warning, too. That is the worst of having sisters: I always told Alick it would not answer.'

Mrs. Glyn threw a comical glance of dismay across at her niece.

'They were two of the nicest girls in Cromehurst. I have known them for years,' she observed pathetically.

'That is just what Alick said this morning. He was as angry with me as possible. He said I had no right to take such a step without consulting him; that he was the master of the house, and so on. And then he declared that he should ask Rebecca to stay.'

'I hope he will; but all the same, it will be very unpleasant for you, Pamela.'

'Do you think I do not know that?' and Pamela's eyes had a naughty flash in them. 'Rebecca will stay just to spite me, and she and Jane will be quietly insolent every day of their lives. I told Alick that if he carried out his threat I should wash my hands of the whole business, and that he could manage the house himself. And what do you think he was rude enough to say? That the house would be better managed, and that, on the whole, he thought me the worst housekeeper that a man could have.'

'Oh, come! that is rather too severe on you, Pamela;' and Mrs. Glyn looked kindly at her favourite, and Gerda observed in a low voice that she was quite sure Dr. Lyall did not mean it.

'You are wrong, Miss Meredith; Alick meant every word he said. He has gone off to Hester now, to talk over his troubles. This is what always happens. Hester will listen to him, and then she will give him advice and comfort him. She will tell him to speak to Rebecca, and give all the orders himself. When I go home, Jane will open the door to me, and there will be a gleam of malicious triumph in her eyes; and then Alick will send for me into the study, and tell me, in a cold, sarcastic voice, that he intends that

both the servants shall stay, and that for the future he hopes I shall do nothing without consulting him. Oh, we have had these little scenes a score of times before—have we not, Mrs. Glyn?—and Hester is always the peace-maker.'

'I wish you were more like her, Pamela;' and Mrs. Glyn shook her head indulgently. 'I am really very sorry for Dr. Lyall—he does so like a quiet life, and to have things comfortable and orderly about him. If it were not for Hester, I hardly know what he would do.'

Pamela heaved a deep sigh.

'"Et tu, Brute!"' she exclaimed reproachfully. 'No one has a good word for me. When I confide in Derrick this evening, he will tell me to my face that it is all my fault. No one understands me, Miss Meredith. Alick treats me as though I were a naughty child, and Derrick laughs at me, and refuses to take my part; and even Mrs. Glyn has not a kind word for me.' But though Pamela spoke quite seriously, and there was a suspicious moisture in her bright eyes, Mrs. Glyn only seemed amused.

'I begin to think you are incorrigible,' she returned; 'and if Gerda were not sitting opposite to us, I should treat you to a lecture myself. I am very fond of you, Pamela, but, all the same, you are a very faulty little person.'

Pamela made a face at her, and such a droll, whimsical expression crossed her features, that Gerda could not help laughing, and in an instant Pamela recovered her good temper.

'That is right, Miss Meredith, you are just like me—you see the humorous side of everything. In spite of my vexation, I nearly burst out laughing in Alick's face this morning, he did look so ridiculously solemn. After all, life is too short for these misunderstandings. It is not in my nature to bear malice. Before many hours are over, I shall have forgiven Alick, and we shall be the best of friends. Now let us talk of something else. How long are you going to stay at Cromehurst?'

'I shall keep her just as long as I can,' returned Mrs. Glyn, glancing at the clock. 'Now I must leave you for half an hour, while I write a letter for my husband, and then we shall have some tea. You are in no hurry, Pamela?'

'Not in the least. I suppose Alick has ordered the dinner, or Derrick will fare badly. Not that I mean to trouble my head about it. I shall fortify myself with tea and cake, and then I shall be prepared for any emergency. You look shocked, Miss Meredith—must I go on calling you Miss Meredith? But everything is fair in love and war, and just now I am waging war with my dearly beloved brother.'

'Yes; but your warfare does not extend to Mr. Vincent?'

'Humph! I am not so sure of that. I will tell you a secret, Miss Meredith. Derrick and I are not an orthodox couple—we are getting over all our quarrels before the happy day arrives—if it ever does arrive;' and here a cloudy look came over Pamela's face.

'I think a long engagement must be rather nice,' observed Gerda. 'One would get to know a person so thoroughly.'

'Oh, that is all very well in theory,' returned Pamela impatiently; 'but I do not agree with you in the least. To a person of my excitable temperament, a long engagement is the most exasperating thing in the world.'

'If this be really your opinion, I wonder you were ever engaged.'

'Well, I would not have been if Derrick had not asked me.' And Pamela blushed very prettily. 'I suppose we poor girls must just submit to our destiny. I tell Derrick he must have bewitched me. Take warning by me, Miss Meredith, and avoid that treacherous pitfall that Man—spelt with a big capital—spreads for the unwary and innocent victim—Man the deceiver, the ruthless destroyer of feminine peace and freedom.'

'Please don't be so tragical,' returned Gerda, laughing. And then, as the subject was a delicate one, and there was a touch of concealed bitterness in Pamela's mocking tones, she skilfully changed the topic to one of more general interest, which lasted until Mrs. Glyn returned, followed by her husband.

Mr. Glyn looked rather stiff and dignified as he took up his favourite position on the rug, but Pamela nodded to him with great friendliness.

'I have turned up again, like a bad penny,' she remarked

pleasantly. 'That is the best of a Vicarage—it is neutral ground—and one's Vicar is bound to be civil to his parishioners, however much he dislikes them. I am one of the lambs of your flock, Mr. Glyn, and if my fleece is not as white as it should be, it is your duty to watch over me.' But Mr. Glyn only frowned over this playful speech, and tried to snub his irrepressible guest by asking Gerda how she had spent the afternoon.

But it was not easy to snub Pamela.

'Do you know, Mr. Glyn,' she observed presently, when he handed her some cake, 'I have had scruples of conscience about idleness lately. I belong to the unemployed—to the drones of life—and it is quite time for me to be a busy, busy bee. I want you to allot me a district.'

'Now, Pamela,' remonstrated Mrs. Glyn, from the tea-table, 'be a good lassie for once.' But Pamela refused to take this gentle hint.

'Of course, you do not believe I am serious,' wrinkling her brows at the Vicar as she spoke; 'but I assure you I am quite in earnest. I have got tired of improving my mind, and I think it is high time to turn my talents to account. Now, a district will just give me the employment I want. I am fond of talking, and I like to mix with my fellow-creatures. And I get on very well with old men, and old women too'—evidently an after-thought. 'Of course, if they were ill, you would not expect me to visit them.'

'Oh, I see,' remarked Mr. Glyn dryly. 'I am sorry to tell you, Miss Lyall, that I have no vacant district to allot to you. If you want employment, you might take a class in our schools, and help Miss Lingard.' But Pamela shook her head with an air of disgust.

'Miss Lingard, the infant-school mistress! No, thank you, Mr. Glyn; that is not at all the work I should choose. I was never very partial to children, even when they were tolerably clean and well-behaved. But infants from Elm-tree Road and Hazelbeech Gardens are odious.'

'Uncle Horace,' interposed Gerda hurriedly, as she saw a gathering blackness on Mr. Glyn's brow, 'I shall be very pleased to help Miss Lingard. I have often taken a class in the schools, and I think the work will just suit me.'

'Thank you, my dear. I shall gladly avail myself of your offer. Miss Lingard's mother is dying, and I am anxious to spare her as much as possible. Perhaps, if you and Bessie were to offer your services to-morrow——'

'It must be in the morning, then,' observed Mrs. Glyn, 'for Hester has asked me to bring Gerda to see her. It is a half-holiday, and she will be at leisure. Shall we see you there, Pamela?'

'I think not,' returned Pamela, buttoning her gloves with some dignity. 'I shall give Daintree Road a wide berth for the present. Good-bye, Miss Meredith. I shall expect you to return this visit very soon. Mrs. Glyn will show you the way to Roadside—Bessie, you may come too, if you like. Good-evening, Mr. Glyn! I am sorry that you will not have me for one of your workers. I shall have to offer my valuable services to Mr. Higginbotham instead.

Now, the Rev. Joseph Higginbotham was the incumbent of an iron church that had recently been erected. He belonged to the Evangelical school, and of late there had been some passages of arms between him and the Vicar of St. Jude's.

'Perhaps there may be refuge for the stray lamb at St. Barnabas's,' she continued, smiling sweetly at the Vicar as she spoke. 'Do you know, Alick attends Mrs. Higginbotham and all the little Higginbothams, so they have a sort of claim on us;' and then Pamela smiled again, and whisked out of the room, to be followed and scolded by Mrs. Glyn.

'You are a naughty child, Pamela!' she said in a vexed voice. 'Whatever made you drag in Mr. Higginbotham's name? He and Horace are at daggers drawn. Mr. Higginbotham was most insulting at the vestry meeting.'

'He is a good little man, and preaches sound doctrine,' returned Pamela obstinately, 'and if Mr. Glyn refuse my services——'

'But, Pamela, it is such nonsense; you are not in the least fitted for district work; you have no idea how strict Horace is with his workers, and yet they are all so devoted to him. You do not mean to say you were really serious?' as she caught sight of Pamela's face.

'Yes, I was,' with a little catch in her voice, that sounded like a sob; 'but no one believes in me. Alick is always

telling me that I do nothing for my fellow-creatures, and life is so dull and stupid. And then there is Derrick always on one's mind.'

'Oh, I see,' returned Mrs. Glyn in a soothing tone, as though she were talking to an infant; 'but Mr. Vincent will soon put it all straight. Things have gone wrong to-day, and you are a little down-hearted; but Mr. Higginbotham and St. Barnabas will not mend matters. If you like, you shall help me in my district; there is such a dear old man —an ex-policeman—who is crippled with rheumatism, and wants someone to read the paper to him;' and then Pamela brightened up and went off quite comforted.

'Pamela was really in earnest, Horace,' observed Mrs. Glyn, when she went back to the drawing-room; 'she is a little bit low in her mind, and wants occupation. I have promised to find her something to do in Acacia Road.'

Mr. Glyn shrugged his shoulders. 'Very well, my dear, you can do as you like. If you choose to introduce quicksilver into your district, you must take the consequences; but I shall not envy you your experience;' and then he went off to his study.

'It is such a pity Miss Lyall and Uncle Horace get on so badly together,' began Gerda, as the door closed after him. 'I am afraid he rather dislikes her than otherwise. What sort of a man is Mr. Vincent? I asked Uncle Horace just now, and he said he was far too good for her.'

'He is certainly very nice, though he is not at all handsome. He is a very big man, and Pamela looks such a tiny creature beside him. He is just her opposite, Gerda: he is placid and even-tempered, and talks very well.'

'Aunt Clare, I do not think Miss Lyall is quite happy in her engagement.'

'Why do you not call her Pamela?—most people do. I think you are mistaken; she is very fond of Derrick Vincent, and I am quite sure nothing would induce her to give him up. He is perfectly devoted to her. You have seen Pamela in an unfortunate mood to-day: everything has gone wrong, and she and her brother have had a serious quarrel; but even in her naughty tempers Pamela is interesting.'

'All the same, I am inclined to pity Mr. Vincent;' and then Gerda put away her work and went to her room.

CHAPTER XVII

'WITH DR. AND MISS LYALL'S COMPLIMENTS'

'Neither in writing nor in reading wilt thou be able to lay down rules for others before thou shalt have first learned to obey rules thyself. Much more is this in life.'—M. AURELIUS ANTONINUS.

GERDA kept her promise, and directly after breakfast the next morning she and Bessie went to the infant school. On their way home she had promised to do some shopping for Mrs. Glyn, and Bessie had willingly accompanied her. It was always a pleasure to Gerda to walk through the town; there was something quaint and picturesque in the gray old houses interspersed between the shops; and she liked to stand on Crown Hill and look down Conduit Street at the old tower of the parish church, flanked by its guardian poplars. The old adage, that distance lends enchantment to the view, was certainly true in this case. A nearer inspection of Conduit Street, with its mean, unsavoury shops, its shabby furniture-dealers and purveyors of old clothes, would have failed to excite even a passing interest; but from Crown Hill the steep, narrow street wore a different aspect. There was a sense of breezy distance—a breadth of sky-line, with soft cloudy effects, the rooks circling round the poplars; and the church-tower seemed to invest the scene with interest: one forgot the shabby wares on either side of the street, to think rather pitifully of the aged lives that wore so peacefully to their close in the modest almshouses below.

'If I were rich, I would rather build almshouses than churches,' observed Gerda, as they lingered to look at an old

bookstall. 'Don't look so shocked, Bessie; you remind me of Doris when you open your eyes like that. I love churches quite as much as you do, but we are not all called upon to do such great work, and I have always been so fond of old people. It breaks my heart to see the poor old creatures in workhouses, without their little comforts and their warm corners. They have worked so hard all their lives, and it is no fault of theirs if their poor old limbs lose power, or get crippled with rheumatism.'

'I have heard mother talk in much the same way,' returned Bessie quietly. She was not sufficiently at her ease with her clever cousin to venture to air her own opinions, and few people guessed at the strength and decision of character which lay under the timid, shrinking manner.

'Aunt Clare and I think alike on most points,' returned Gerda quickly. 'Don't you see, Bessie, hardship does not seem to matter when one is young and strong—the back is fitted for the burden; but the old are so weak, they are like little children in their helplessness: they want sunshine, kindness, a corner by their own fireside, a hand held out to them now and then. That is why I should like to build almshouses, to keep them safe and warm until they are called home.'

'Oh yes, I see what you mean,' returned Bessie; and then she added, with a sort of effort, 'It is a pity that old Mrs. Chalmers and Mrs. Horsfall bicker so dreadfully. Father had to interfere once. Mrs. Chalmers was so spiteful. She slopped all over poor Mrs. Horsfall's floor one day, just as she had cleaned it. Mrs. Chalmers said her foot slipped, and her pail tipped over, but no one believes it; it was just spitefulness on account of the grocery tickets.'

'My dear child, human nature is imperfect, even in almshouses; but I hope Mrs. Chalmers is an exception. Why, who is that gentleman?'—as Bessie coloured and bowed to a good-looking young man who was wheeling a child's perambulator on the other side of the street. Gerda had noticed him before Bessie had given that sign of recognition. She had wondered who that striking-looking man could be. There was something out of the common and picturesque about him; he looked rather like a foreigner, with his olive complexion and fur-lined coat, and there was

something incongruous in his homely employment: one might as well have expected to see a Bond Street lounger wheeling home a truck of clean clothes.

'That is Mr. Vincent,' returned Bessie in a low voice. 'He is crossing the road. I think he wants to speak to us. Do you mind waiting a moment, Gerda?'

'Do you mean Mr. Julius Vincent? Of course I do not mind;' and then both girls watched the skilful propelling of the perambulator between a coal-cart and a waggon. Most people would have hesitated to cross Crown Hill at that moment, but Mr. Vincent seemed to have no scruple. He held up his hand as a caution to an omnibus-driver, and shook his head reproachfully at a cabman, before he and his charge were landed safely on the pavement.

'A thousand apologies for keeping you two ladies waiting,' observed Mr. Vincent, raising his hat; 'but I was on my way to St. Jude's Vicarage with a note from my wife; and then Ray suddenly discovered she was cold and hungry, and that we must go home at once. Between my two liege ladies, I was in sorry plight, until I caught sight of you, Miss Bessie, and then I resolved to throw myself on your goodness.'

'I will certainly take your note, Mr. Vincent. Poor little Ray! She looks quite blue with cold.'

'She does indeed,' murmured Gerda, with a pitying look at the child's pale face. There was something painfully pathetic in the melancholy dark eyes and thin, drawn features under the big hood, which told their own sad tale of suffering. There is always something unnatural in the idea of a mere infant struggling with some cruel chronic disease. It would have been a beautiful little face, Gerda thought, but for the sharp lines and grave, unsmiling eyes.

'Ray wants to go home, dada,' observed the child fretfully.

'And you shall go home, my darling,' returned Mr. Vincent tenderly. 'Dada is a naughty, naughty man to take Ray out in the cold. Ray must whip him with her new little whip when she gets home, until he cries out.—Miss Bessie, I am your debtor from this day. Good-morning, ladies. There has been no introduction, but I presume this is your cousin, Miss Meredith?—Now then, Beauty

bright, for the whip!' and the next moment he was propelling the perambulator across Crown Hill.

'What a strange man!' observed Gerda; 'but he is really very handsome—and how young he looks! there is something almost boyish in his manner. It seems such a droll idea, wheeling that perambulator.'

'Oh, he always does it,' returned Bessie; 'and no one thinks anything of it at Cromehurst. It is just Mr. Vincent's way to do odd things. I believe Ray refuses to go out with anyone else. He has spoilt her dreadfully, and now he is a perfect slave to her whims. Ray is much fonder of him than she is of her mother; but, then, poor Mrs. Vincent is too busy to attend to her.'

'It seems rather a strange household,' returned her cousin. 'From all accounts, Mrs. Vincent and her husband have reversed the usual order of things: she is the breadwinner, and he takes the part of nurse. One can hardly understand the position.'

'You will understand it when you go there,' replied Bessie rather sadly. 'Mr. Vincent is very good-natured, but he fritters away his time dreadfully; and there is so little real work done that poor Mrs. Vincent is obliged to put her shoulder to the wheel. Someone must work, you know. He gives drawing-lessons, but people are afraid to have him: they say he is too handsome and flighty in manner to be safe with girls; but mother says that is nonsense, and that there is no harm in him.'

This was a long speech for Bessie, but she evidently shared her father's opinion of Mr. Vincent, and had scant patience with the fascinating Julius. Gerda felt both curious and interested. She longed to see this wonderful Mrs. Vincent—the Hester who was her Uncle Horace's ideal, and for whom Aunt Clare felt such warm affection. And then, by some subtle connection of ideas, she wondered if any of Dr. Lyall's patients lived in the town. It was strange to think that any moment they might meet him. She longed to ask Bessie if he walked or drove; they were passing Dr. Brown's house at that moment, and a doctor's brougham with a bay mare was standing at the door.

'I thought Dr. Brown drove a pair of gray horses?' she observed carelessly—and the bait took.

'So he does,' returned Bessie innocently; 'that is Dr. Lyall's brougham. He told mother the other day that he could not well afford a carriage until his practice increased, but the long distances obliged him to keep one. It is rather a shabby brougham, but, then, Dr. Lyall does not care about appearances.'

'I dare say not,' was the brief answer, and then Gerda grew a little absent.

Her colour rose slightly when, by and by, she heard wheels behind them. She hardly ventured to look round as the brougham passed them. She slackened her pace involuntarily as it stopped again before a house and Dr. Lyall descended. Evidently he had not seen them: he went up the steps quickly, and let himself in; it must be his own house, but Gerda never glanced at it as she went by. She felt a little chilled—disappointed. Could it be possible that, after all, he had seen them and avoided recognition? He knew of her arrival—she had been two whole days in the place; and of course Pamela had called on her. After all, why should she torment herself in this way? He was reading his paper—doctors always read their paper—why need he stare at every passer-by? He might be absorbed in thought of some critical operation, or perhaps one of his patients was worse—dying. Doctors must be different from other men; they went from one sick-bed to another; their life was so crowded with interest, such awful interest, it was no wonder they could pass their friends without seeing them.

Gerda felt a little comforted when she arrived at this point, but she was a trifle restless, and her uncle's discourse at luncheon fell on deaf ears; she only roused into animation when Mrs. Glyn spoke of their afternoon visit.

'Should you mind going very early?' she asked. 'If we are fashionable, and arrive about tea-time, we shall have to put up with Mr. Vincent's society, and I think we women would like a little chat by ourselves first.'

'No one would doubt that for a moment, my dear,' replied Mr. Glyn dryly, as he rose from the table—which was rather unhandsome on the Vicar's part, as he had kept the conversation in his own hands for the last half-hour; 'I think a woman would rather go without her food than without talking.'

But Mrs. Glyn was not to be damped by her husband's sarcasm.

'When Hester and I get together, we have a real interesting talk,' she returned brightly. 'You need not shake your head, Horace; men like gossip just as well as we do; and I expect there is plenty of small-talk at the clubs.'

'Aunt Clare,' interrupted Gerda mischievously, 'do you remember Lord Houghton's famous speech? "There is nothing so wearying as continually playing at superiority." There is a great deal of preaching at us poor women folk; but I expect the men talk scandal too.'

'Pax, pax!' returned Mr. Glyn, with a gesture as though he were brushing off some noxious insect; 'one woman is enough for me to manage. Have your own way, my dear, as long as I am not obliged to hear your conversation, I will put no veto upon it; Eve's daughters have all a strong family likeness,' and with this scathing remark the Vicar retired to his study to prepare himself for his afternoon's labours.

'I think I shall get to like Uncle Horace in time,' thought Gerda, as she went up to her room; 'he is dictatorial, but he is not nearly so severe as he used to be: he is more careful of other people's feelings.'

Gerda was surprised to find that they would have to pass Roadside again on their way to Daintree Road; but this time she ventured on a glance. It was rather a high, narrow house, and only an area railing separated it from the pavement. A flight of steps led to the door, and the windows had wire blinds to ensure privacy.

'You must not judge from the outside,' observed Mrs. Glyn, as though she feared some deprecating remark. 'Roadside is not a modern house, but it is really very comfortable, and its low rent induced Dr. Lyall to take it. The two windows on the left belong to the dining-room, and the study is on the other side; Pamela's drawing-room is upstairs. Ah, here comes the little lady! I believe she was on the watch for us.'

Pamela came down the steps with great dignity. She had two little notes in her hand, which she delivered with great solemnity. 'For Mrs. Glyn and Miss Meredith, with Dr. and Miss Lyall's compliments,' she lisped—Pamela had

an engaging little lisp when she chose. And then she turned as though to go up the steps again; but Mrs. Glyn detained her.

'What does this mean, Pamela?—not an invitation to dinner, I hope.'

'You must not be too sanguine, Mrs. Glyn; you will find it all correct. "Dr. and Miss Lyall request the pleasure, etc.—R.S.V.P." I got printed cards on purpose. Shall I walk with you to the corner of Daintree Road?' she continued; 'cart-ropes would not drag me farther. I do love a nice biting east wind; it seems to put life into one. I shall go for a five-mile walk, and think of my sins. I am half inclined to fetch Jessie Brown, just by way of penance, only I dare not trust my temper.'

'Pamela,' interrupted Mrs. Glyn reprovingly, as she read the note, 'there was no need for all this ceremony. I meant to ask you and your brother to come in one evening; but why should you put yourselves to such trouble? My husband has not a single evening free for the next week, and I hardly like to leave him.'

'You and Alick must settle that between you,' returned Pamela indifferently. 'I have had my orders, and I am carrying them out. There has been a grand scene of reconciliation, and I am on my best behaviour. I think the meagre diet yesterday had a salutary effect on my high and mighty brother, for he condescended to ask me to show him the intended bill of fare. But it was still simmering in my brain. "If you are a good girl, Pam, and give us a decent dinner, you may have Derrick down." Was not that a bribe?'

'Did they fare so very badly yesterday?' asked Mrs. Glyn anxiously; and Pamela's eyes sparkled with naughty fun.

'Well, it was a cold night, you see, and a leg of mutton on the third day is never very inviting; but there were pickles—plenty of pickles—and with bread and cheese——'

'Pamela, how could you be so unfeeling! It was really barbarous treatment to those poor tired men,' really waxing a little warm in her sympathy. 'It was carrying a joke too far—it was almost ill-natured.' But Pamela took this outburst with surprising meekness.

'I think I must call for Jessie Brown,' she observed with a deep sigh, 'or the fruits of repentance will be wanting. What a pity both Mr. Glyn and Mr. Higginbotham disapprove of auricular confession—it would be such a comfortable ordinance to a sinner like myself.'

'Pamela, do not be irreverent!' And then, after a moment's reflection, 'I rather wonder at Dr. Lyall. I should have thought last night's experience would have prevented his inviting anyone to dinner for a long time.'

'Oh dear no! Besides, I promised faithfully that such a thing should never happen again. Well, here we are at Daintree Road. Give my love to Hester;' and Pamela nodded to them both, and whisked round the corner.

'Aunt Clare,' asked Gerda in a dubious tone, 'do you not think that Pamela treats her brother very badly?'

'I think I shall decline to answer that question. I am afraid they are rather an ill-assorted couple to live together. Pamela ought to have married, and Hester should have kept her brother's house. Things always went smoothly in the old times—he has told me so over and over again. "When Hester married, I had no more home comfort," he said once. It is my belief that Pamela is really devoted to her brother, and that in some way he repels and disappoints her. She is a most exacting little person, and all this flightiness and nonsense is her mode of taking revenge. If only Dr. Lyall could afford a wife! but Hester's unlucky marriage has only added to his responsibilities. He is one of the best brothers—indeed, one of the best men I know.' And with this splendid eulogium on Dr. Lyall, Mrs. Glyn paused at the gate of a large old-fashioned house, standing rather far back from the road, with 'Establishment for Young Ladies' on a glittering brass plate.

CHAPTER XVIII

HESTER

'What a rare thing is a grown-up mind!'
LORD HOUGHTON.

AN elderly servant admitted them into a large gloomy hall. And the next moment Gerda was looking round a small, scantily-furnished drawing-room with a somewhat critical glance, while Mrs. Glyn sank into an easy-chair by the fire with a sigh of content.

'I think I must be getting old,' she remarked rather seriously, 'for even a short walk seems to tire me now. Why, in the old days, I thought nothing of ten miles.'

'I am sure you are not as strong as you ought to be,' returned Gerda, with a trace of anxiety in her tone. 'I was telling Bessie so this morning as we walked to school. You used not to pant when you went upstairs, Aunt Clare. And you are getting dreadfully thin. I am sure, from what Bessie says, you do far too much. The house and all that parish work were more than enough without teaching Nora and Janie.'

'I think I have heard this all before,' returned Mrs. Glyn, smiling. 'Don't you know I love work, Gerda—that I am never willingly idle a moment? To be sure,' she continued, with her customary frankness, 'I should be glad of an hour's rest now and then. I think your Uncle Horace has infused some of his energy into me, for as a girl I was dreadfully idle. But he sets us all such an example. Oh, is he not good, Gerda?'—with a sudden softening of her voice. 'His life

is just an unwritten sermon. If only my dear boy would take after him! We have not talked about Walter yet. Do you think him improved, Gerda? I do not mean in looks. Of course he is handsome—he is quite a Hamlyn—but is he not growing a fine manly fellow?'

Gerda was spared an answer, as at that moment Mrs. Vincent entered, with an apology for keeping them waiting. 'I was finishing a letter for Julius, and he would not let me go,' she observed, as she kissed Mrs. Glyn and then shook hands warmly with Gerda.

For the first instant Gerda felt herself a little disappointed. This tall, worn-looking woman, with the sallow complexion and deep-set eyes, was hardly the Hester Vincent she had expected to see. No, she could never have been handsome, even in her youth, and her figure was too thin and angular for grace. But the next moment, as she smiled, Gerda was conscious of a thrill of recognition. Hester had her brother's smile, and her eyes had the same steady, clear look that Gerda so well remembered. At once she felt herself attracted and interested. Mrs. Vincent smiled involuntarily as she noticed the girl's earnest scrutiny.

'We must not consider ourselves as strangers, Miss Meredith,' she said in a friendly manner. 'I have heard of you from my brother and Pamela, and your aunt and I are dear friends. You have come just in time to help me. Mrs. Glyn is working herself to death, and she expects her friends to stand by and see her do it.'

'Oh, Hester!' very reproachfully. 'This from you, of all people, who are wearing yourself to skin and bone.'

'Perhaps so; but the process gives me no pleasure,' returned Mrs. Vincent, laughing. 'If you only knew how I hate this daily grind! I tell Julius that I conjugate verbs even in my dreams. Necessity is a hard task-master. When I come to those words, "kicking against the pricks," I always think of myself. I believe that I have quite forgotten how to play,' she went on with a sigh. 'When I watch Julius with Ray, I quite envy him his powers of amusement. Did I ever tell you what the child said once when I tried to build up a card-house for her? "I don't like playing with mother—she sighs so—and the cards don't like it neither."'

'What a naughty little Ray!'

'No, not naughty, poor darling! Only there is no playfellow like her father. But we are turning off from the subject. I am really serious, Miss Meredith. Your aunt is killing herself.'

'I quite agree with you. I have just been telling her that it is wrong of her to teach Janie and Nora.'

'Wrong! it is more than wrong. Mr. Glyn must be blind indeed. Do you know that I have offered to have Janie and Nora here? They could learn with the other children, and it would give me no extra trouble. Mademoiselle is such a treasure to me. But, no, the Glyn pride is up in arms; they will not be beholden to anyone. And this is what they call friendship.'

But Mrs. Glyn checked her impetuous speech.

'Hester,' she said gently, and there were tears in her eyes, 'it hurts me to hear you talk like this. You must never say that again. I am proud—yes; but I think my pride is right. Gerda, you are a sensible girl; you shall judge between us. Would it be fair—would it be consistent—for me to shift my maternal burdens to the shoulders of this generous creature, who is already so overweighted? You tell me I work hard, and I do not deny the fact; but with Hester existence is one long toil from early morning until midnight. No, you shall not silence me'—as Hester tried to stop her. 'You have brought this upon yourself. Have you not told me that you are often down by six, correcting the children's exercises?'

'I don't do that now,' returned Hester, disconsolately; 'Julius will not let me; but I know I am dreadfully late at night. But, all the same, Janie and Nora would not add to my labours. Mademoiselle would see to them.'

But Mrs. Glyn shook her head with an affectionate smile.

'No, Hester dear—no; it must not be done; but, all the same, I am deeply grateful to you. Remember, I am an older woman than you, and have bought experience dearly. "Bear ye one another's burdens" must not be literally obeyed.'

'Will you consent to give up your district, then?' asked Hester, a little doggedly.

At this question Gerda clapped her hands softly; but Mrs. Glyn reddened and looked uncomfortable.

'No, indeed! What would my husband say?'

'Have you ever spoken to him on the subject?' persisted Hester. 'Miss Meredith, your presence gives me courage—there is strength in numbers; now I have you on my side, I feel more sanguine of victory. Come, Mrs. Glyn, we are both waiting for your answer.'

'What an obstinate woman you are, Hester! I am not sure that I shall submit to this catechism. As a British subject, I claim the right to wear myself out if I choose. I wish for once I could tell a fib, but when I was a child Ananias and Sapphira were my pet bogies, and since then I have been so painfully truthful! Well, if you must know, I did once hint to Horace that I found the mothers' meeting, and Bible-class, and the Friendly Girls' Society, and all the parochial charities and accounts, as much as I could manage, and that the district was the last straw; but he did not see it at all—in fact, he was quite shocked. He said a clergywoman had her duties as much as a clergyman, and that I was bound to set a good example in the parish.'

'And of course you submitted like a good wife!' returned Mrs. Vincent in an exasperated tone. 'I am very fond of the Vicar—in fact, he is one of my best friends; but all the same I have no patience with him.'

'For pity's sake change the subject, Gerda!' pleaded Mrs. Glyn wearily. 'You have no idea how I am persecuted—if you want to lecture anyone, Hester, I should advise you to try your hand on Pamela.'

Then Mrs. Vincent looked very serious. 'Poor dear Alick!' she sighed; and then she glanced at Gerda.

'Oh, you need not mind Gerda,' returned Mrs. Glyn, quickly. 'Pamela has confessed her sins. I believe she is doing penance with Jessie Brown. Gerda knows all about Rebecca and the mutton-bone.'

'Please don't laugh!' and Hester wore her schoolmistress's look, and the slight frown that contracted her brow reminded Gerda still more of Dr. Lyall. It was with just such a frown that he had listened to Captain Hake's joke on the night of the dinner-party. 'It is no laughing matter, I assure you,' she continued. 'I never saw Alick more put out. He told

me that things had come to such a pass that he never knew what Pamela would do next; that at times she behaved as though she were crazy or bewitched; and that no scolding or coaxing on his part had any effect on her. She behaved as badly as possible that night, and as Rebecca was in her airs he could get no redress. It was literally a mutton-bone that was placed on the table; and to make things worse, there were five or six kinds of pickles.' Then, as Gerda laughed, and Mrs. Glyn followed her example: 'So it was the most uncomfortable meal possible. Even Derrick, with all his good-nature, hardly knew how to take it; and there was Pam in her ridiculous harlequin dress—that red and pink thing that we all hate — smiling and chattering as though nothing were the matter.'

'I am perfectly ashamed of Pamela,' observed Mrs. Glyn, who was quite exhausted with laughing. 'I am rather surprised, after such an experience, that Dr. Lyall has ventured to invite us to dinner. I really think we ought to decline.'

'You must do nothing of the kind,' returned Hester decidedly. 'Pamela made it up with him this morning, and I believe she proposed that you should be invited, as a sort of peace-offering. She has promised Alick that such a disgraceful affair shall never happen again; and Derrick is to be asked, too.'

'In that case, I suppose we must accept; but Horace never dines out if he can help it, so Gerda and I must go alone—that is, if she be willing.'

Then Gerda blushed, and returned hesitatingly that she supposed they ought to go.

'Walter must go in his father's place,' observed Mrs. Vincent; then she paused, and stirred the fire rather absently, as though she were considering something. 'Walter has been here this morning,' she continued, but her tone was a little peculiar.

Mrs. Glyn did not seem to notice it—she only smiled at this piece of information.

'Both my husband and son are devoted to Mrs. Vincent,' she said, turning to Gerda. 'If Walter is ever missing at meal-times, we know he is at Daintree House. Hester understands boys as well as she does girls. I believe she is more in Walter's confidence than I am.'

'I thought Walter told you everything, Aunt Clare.'

'If he keeps anything back, it is because he is so tender-hearted that he cannot bear to disappoint his mother;' and again Hester's tone was strangely significant. Mrs. Glyn looked at her in surprise.

'Is there anything I ought to know, Hester?' she asked quickly.

'Yes, dear; and I told Walter so this morning. Your boy is a fine lad. If I were his mother, I should be proud of such a son. He takes after you, Mrs. Glyn—he has just your spirit and temper; but if you will excuse me for saying it, I am afraid his father holds the reins a little too tightly.

Mrs. Glyn sighed. It was evident that she could not contradict this; but, as usual, she stood up loyally for her husband.

'Horace is very fond of him, but he thinks young people require strictness. When he was a boy, he was kept under severe discipline. They used the rod, both literally as well as metaphorically, in those days. He has often told me that his youth was hardly a happy one. I wish Walter would confide more in his father,' she went on. 'Sometimes I am afraid Horace misunderstands him. He often complains that there is no companionship between them, and that it is far easier to talk to Willie. When they take walks together, Walter never seems to have anything to say. Even when Horace told him that he had made up his mind to send him to Oxford, and that on his account we would gladly stint ourselves, Walter merely muttered something about undeserved kindness, and then relapsed into silence.'

'Were Walter's wishes ever consulted? I mean'—as Mrs. Glyn seemed startled by this question—'did Mr. Glyn ever give him the choice of a profession? "They want to make a parson of me. I think every fellow ought to have a say about his own future." These were his very words, as he sat opposite to me this morning.'

Mrs. Glyn grew very pale—she seemed hardly prepared for this.

'Do you mean that Walter has changed his mind?' she asked. 'Hester, you must not be hard on us. From a little fellow, Walter always knew we had dedicated our

first-born, and I never heard an objection from his lips. He used to say sometimes that he did not see how we could afford to send him to Oxford; but he never gave us a hint that the idea was displeasing to him. I feel deeply hurt that Walter should not have told me this himself; and as for Horace, I dare not think what the disappointment will be to him.'

'I have told you nothing—nothing,' replied Mrs. Vincent. 'When Walter begged me to tell you the truth, I flatly refused. "I will be no go-between. I am your friend, but I am also your parents' friend. It is not for me to inflict this pain." Poor dear fellow! he looked so unhappy. "I must go through with it, I suppose," he said at last; "but I warn you that it will be a half-hearted affair. I shall never make a clergyman like my father." And to comfort him, I promised that I would give you a hint.'

'Thank you, Hester,' returned Mrs. Glyn in a sad voice; but she looked old and fagged as she spoke. 'I will not ask you any more questions; I will speak to Walter myself.' Then Gerda and Mrs. Vincent exchanged looks of sympathy. It seemed to the girl as though years had been added to her Aunt Clare's age. 'Walter is a good boy; he will not disappoint you,' she whispered; but Mrs. Glyn shook her head with a sigh: her lad was too much like his mother, she thought to herself; 'if only he had taken more after his father!'

'I am afraid this is a dull visit for Miss Meredith,' observed Hester, becoming mindful of her duties as a hostess.—'Shall I take you into the studio?' turning to Gerda, 'and Mrs. Glyn shall join us when she likes. Tea is always served in the studio,' she continued, as Gerda assented—'partly because it is the most cheerful room in the house, and partly because Julius allows no monopoly of guests. He is very sociable, and he always insists on my bringing my lady friends to his room.'

'Yes, go, Gerda; I will follow you directly;' and Mrs. Glyn nodded with a faint smile. She seemed suddenly cold, and shivered a little as she drew closer to the fire. 'My poor Horace, what a blow for him!' she thought, as the closing door left her alone.

'Please wait a moment, Mrs. Vincent!' exclaimed Gerda

as they stood in the hall. 'If Walter does not wish to take orders, has he made up his mind to any other profession? You may tell me,' as Hester hesitated; 'it will be quite safe.'

'He wishes to go out to the Colonies!'

Gerda uttered an exclamation of dismay.

'He is no student, though his father does not seem to have found this out; he loathes his classical studies. Some friends of his are going out to New Zealand, and he is wild to join them.'

'It will half kill Aunt Clare to part with him; she dotes on Walter.'

'And Walter is devoted to her; but I am afraid his father rather repels him, and that there is very little sympathy between them. I have boys of my own, Miss Meredith, and they are good boys, too, though their mother says it; and I think very deeply about the duties of parents. It seems to me,' she continued, speaking with deep earnestness, 'that people have their own preconceived notions of things, and that they are too apt to thrust their own ready-made opinions on their children, instead of meeting them half-way. Do you suppose those vigorous, fresh young minds have no ideas of their own worth enunciating, that we must for ever crush them with our stale experience?'

'Yes, I see what you mean,' returned Gerda thoughtfully; 'Uncle Horace is rather too strict with Walter.'

'How are these young plants to grow, and blossom, and bear fruit, unless we give them plenty of room? Will our candlelight wisdom ripen them as fast as God's blessed sunshine? Ah! perhaps you are too young to understand me; but in my opinion it is the young who are so close to God, the little ones, who, with all their faults, lean more trustfully upon Him!'

'I wish Aunt Clare could hear you,' returned Gerda wistfully.

She was charmed with Mrs. Vincent. How childish and trite Pamela's flighty talk seemed beside Hester's grand seriousness! They were pacing up and down the cold dark hall as they conversed, and Hester's deep rich voice seemed to penetrate Gerda's soul. This was what she loved, to dig deep and get at the heart of things, as the miner burrows

in the earth for the coveted ore. Pamela's clear sparkling conversation, at once playful and pert, reminded her of the scratching of a bantam cock over the surface of a dust-heap where a child's tinsel toys have got buried: the treasures that came to light were so flimsy, and so brilliant.

'Your Aunt Clare is the "perfect woman nobly planned,"' returned Hester in her quick, vivid speech. 'Do you know, I lost my heart to her the first moment I saw her, and that is just three years ago. How is it we have never met, Miss Meredith? Ah, I remember: I was away the last time you were at Cromehurst, and I think the same thing happened the year before.'

'What a pity to have lost so much time!' observed Gerda in a regretful tone; and Mrs. Vincent smiled at the compliment. 'Of course Aunt Clare often spoke of you among her other friends; but I suppose we only take passing interest in strangers. When Pamela mentioned your name, I thought it was some other Vincents, the lawyer's family in Park Street.'

'Yes, I see. Shall we go into the studio now? this hall is far too cold and draughty;' and then, as she opened the door near them, a stream of warm firelight met them. 'My husband is a fire-worshipper,' observed Hester. 'Fie! what extravagance, Julius, all those splendid logs heaped up in such profusion!'

'They were meant as a welcome to your friends, you parsimonious woman!' returned Mr. Vincent playfully, as he sprang up from his chair. 'Where is Mrs. Glyn?' looking beyond them. And Hester explained that she was resting for a little. 'I should have known you were her niece, without any introduction, Miss Meredith,' he continued, as he wheeled up the easy-chair for Gerda, and hastened to put a glass screen between her and the blaze. 'Mrs. Glyn is my ideal of an English gentlewoman—plenty of heart and plenty of common-sense, two very necessary ingredients in a woman.'

Hester smiled as she seated herself by the couch, where Ray was sitting, propped up with cushions, playing with a small white kitten.

'How is my darling this evening?' Gerda heard her whisper in the child's ear, as she stroked the fair, smooth

hair, that shone like gold in the firelight. But Ray shook off the caressing hand a little irritably.

'You have waked kitty, mother. She was ever so fast asleep,' she said reproachfully. 'Ah, she is crying now!' as a faint, piteous mew corroborated her words. 'Oh, please go away while I hush her to by-by again;' and Ray knitted her baby brows rather angrily.

'You must not be cross, my precious,' began Hester, in a firm, admonishing tone, but her eyes were full of wistful tenderness.

But Mr. Vincent interposed in an airy manner:

'Don't be bracing, Hester—let me beg you not to be bracing—please remember our compact; in the studio the schoolmistress is not at home. Don't you call that an admirable arrangement?' addressing Gerda, as Hester drew back with a wounded expression. 'My wife and I are exact opposites—I don't believe we think alike on a single point—this makes life interesting, not to say exciting. In the house, in the school, she rules supreme, and I am her devoted and humble slave; in this room,' looking round him with pardonable pride, 'Beauty-bright holds absolute sway. Is it not so, my pet? We indulge our little tempers unchecked; we have our variable moods; we enjoy a wholesome change of temperature from storm to sunshine.'

'It is false kindness to the child never to check her irritability. I have told you this over and over again, Julius,' returned Hester quietly, as she took up her position at the tea-table. 'But where Ray is concerned you are not reasonable.'

Hester spoke calmly and without temper, and Mr. Vincent received her rebuke with the utmost good-humour.

'My wife is one of the best women in the world,' he observed in an undertone, 'but she is a trifle too bracing. When I want to punish her I call her "Mrs. Teach'em." For some esoteric reason she objects to the name.'

'Julius! why will you be so absurd?' returned his wife, trying to smile. 'Now I am going to commission you to fetch Mrs. Glyn.'

Mr. Vincent nodded and vanished.

'What a beautiful room!' observed Gerda as the door closed.

The contrast between this warm, softly-lighted apart-

ment, with its luxurious easy-chairs and carved oak cabinets, and the meagre, shabbily-furnished drawing-room they had just left, affected her strangely, and gave her a feeling of moral vertigo. If they were poor—and one glance at Mrs. Vincent's old gown attested that fact — how could Mr. Vincent have obtained those costly Persian rugs and the dainty embroideries that draped the couch where Ray nestled among her cushions? The old china on brackets, the outlandish Eastern garments and fragments of tapestry, were all of value. An easel, with a half-finished picture, was drawn ostentatiously into the middle of the room, with a yellow veil thrown over it.

'I dare say my husband will show you his picture,' observed Hester, as she saw Gerda glance at it. 'He is a little whimsical at times, and dislikes any sort of exhibition; but he seems in a better mood this evening. Yes, this is a delicious room, and Julius has shown a great deal of taste in his arrangements. Ray spends her days here. I cannot coax her to stop with me for half an hour; she is never happy without her father. I am afraid my little girl is very undisciplined; but Julius will not allow me to thwart her. It is a sad mistake,' looking at the child's small, white face with almost passionate tenderness.

Ray had recovered her temper, and was fondling her kitten and talking to it quite happily.

'How old is she?' asked Gerda in a whisper.

'She is seven, but no one would take her to be more than five—she is so tiny. She has a diseased hip, and sometimes she suffers a great deal. And then she will allow no one to touch her but her father.'

'It must be very hard for you,' observed Gerda.

'Yes, and at first I felt it a good deal. But, after all, it is very natural. Ray hardly sees me except at meal-times. I am always in the schoolroom. And then you have no idea how patient and good Julius is with her. He will pace up and down the room with her for hours when she is fretful with pain. And he often paints with her on his knee. How few men,' she continued, 'would set aside popular prejudice, and be seen in broad daylight wheeling a child's perambulator! But Julius cares nothing for the opinion of strangers,' she finished, with a charming smile.

CHAPTER XIX

DR. LYALL RELIEVES HIS MIND

'It is far easier to be wise for others than to be for one's-self.'—LA ROCHEFOUCAULD.

'We pardon in the degree we love.'—*Ibid.*

A MOMENT later Mr. Vincent returned to the room with his guest. Mrs. Glyn had recovered herself, and there was no perceptible effort in the way she responded to his gay badinage. Evidently they were old foes, and accustomed to skirmishes. 'My practical friend,' as Mr. Vincent called her, 'who worships at the shrine of utility.'

'By-the-bye, Mr. Vincent,' she observed, as he handed her a cup of tea, 'I hope you intend to treat my niece to a view of the picture,' with a slight emphasis that brought the colour to Mr. Vincent's face.

He was evidently a little sensitive on this point, for he hesitated for a moment. 'Can Miss Meredith decipher hieroglyphics?' he returned rather pointedly.

Mrs. Glyn broke into a soft laugh. 'Your husband bears malice, Hester. He has never forgiven my criticism. I am such a terrible Philistine, and, you see, my art education has been so sadly neglected. Miss Meredith has far more imagination than I, Mr. Vincent. She will not shock you by her crude remarks. Gerda, you must ask very prettily. Mr. Vincent will not be so rude as to refuse a lady.'

Gerda had been sitting quietly in her warm corner, listening to the conversation. Mr. Vincent amused and interested her. He looked handsomer than ever in his black

velvet coat, with a crimson flower in his buttonhole. His hair was a little long, and his dark complexion certainly gave him the appearance of a foreigner, especially as the heavy silky moustache entirely concealed the mouth. Gerda could not suppress a secret incredulity and wonder as she looked at Hester's grave, careworn face. Why had this man, with his wonderful powers of fascination, fallen in love with a woman like Hester? But when she hinted this to Mrs. Glyn afterwards, that lady was very ready with her answer.

'You are quite wrong if you imagine the love was all on Hester's side,' she observed. 'He was crazy to get her, and yet she was no beauty even then. You do not understand, Gerda, what charm Hester's strong, calm nature has for a man like Mr. Vincent. With his mercurial temperament, he is very subject to depression, and no one can soothe him as his wife does. Of course, he tries her. They are such complete opposites, and he has not her high principles; but, in his own way, he is very fond of her.'

Gerda rose rather eagerly as Mr. Vincent stepped up to the veiled easel. And then a smaller picture attracted her notice.

'Oh, what a lovely little face!' she exclaimed. 'It reminds me slightly of your little girl, only it is so round and rosy. "Cinderella!" O, poor mite! she has fallen asleep on a cinder-heap. But that is rather a sorry prince!' pointing to a clumsy figure with a sack over his head and shoulders, 'who is looking at the child with uncouth benevolence.'

'Is it not a charming picture?' observed Hester, in a pleased tone. 'I am so fond of that dear little "Cinderella," and so is Ray. Oh, if Julius would only take my advice, and paint more pictures in this style!'

'Pshaw! a mere pot-boiler,' returned her husband disdainfully; 'but this comes of marrying a daughter of Heth. My wife has not the faintest idea of art; my little sister-in-law is far more appreciative. Pamela has feeling; she can make allowances for a poor artist.'

'I understood that Pamela did not admire your new picture,' observed Hester, in a pained tone. She was accustomed to these sort of speeches, but they always hurt

her. It was one of her daily trials that Julius never came to her for sympathy in his work, that her opinion was never desired. 'She certainly told me that it was wanting in distinctness.'

'I did not say she admired it, my dear,' in rather an irritable tone. 'Admiration is the last thing I expect; but Pamela paid me the compliment of a most painstaking study,' which was certainly true; but Mr. Vincent might have added that her criticism was a little vague: 'It has a good name, Julius: "The thoughts of youth are long, long thoughts;" it is all distance and haze, and golden light. Who are those people coming out of that flame-coloured cloud? Dear me!' putting up her pince-nez and frowning horribly, 'are they people or crows? Oh, I see, spirits from the vasty deep. Thank you, Julius—an immense subject; but you have treated it with wonderful breadth and liberality.'

Gerda stood in perplexed silence; she could make nothing of the picture; it was a dream, a nightmare of confused colouring, of witch-like faces and dim, unfinished draperies.

'It is not easy to understand,' she faltered. 'I suppose I am not a good judge; but I prefer "Cinderella" a thousand times.'

'Many thanks for your frankness,' returned Julius with easy courtesy, as he covered up his precious picture; but there was a slight cloud on his brow. This was always his luck; no one could understand him. They were all barbarous, these Philistines; no one could give him sympathy but Pamela, and even she had failed him. 'Cinderella,' indeed! a mere bagatelle, a poor shifty pot-boiler that he had painted when his wife's tongue had lashed him a little too unmercifully. Why had they not made him a stock-broker or a shopkeeper? his ideal would not have plagued him then. It was the old story, after all—he was the unappreciated genius, the square peg in the round hole. He ought to have married Pamela, only unfortunately he had fallen in love with Hester. And then, as he covered up his picture, Hester held out her hand to him with a penitent look.

'I wish, oh, I do wish I could see it with your eyes, Julius,' she whispered, and he was instantly mollified.

'My best friend,' he returned in a gay insouciant tone, 'you can only see as far as your eyes will permit you to see. If your sight be imperfect, you must blame Nature. Leave me to flirt with the divine goddess, while you and your girls sit in the grooves of Parnassus. Do they add up long columns of figures in Parnassus, my Hester? Do they evoke the once renowned Lindley Murray among those pleasing shades? Keep to your pupils, and allow me to intoxicate myself with dreams that will never come true;' and then he kissed his wife's thin hand with a sort of boyish chivalry, and hastened to put the glass screen between Ray's couch and the firelight. The child had fallen asleep in the drowsy warmth, and lay with her cheek against the kitten.

'Is she really asleep? Let me carry her up to bed,' pleaded Hester. 'I can undress her before she wakes: please let me, Julius, it is far better so. You remember what Alick said?' and Mr. Vincent yielded unwillingly.

'Alick, our family oracle, Mrs. Glyn, the young man's guide, counsellor, and friend. "Why, talk of the——" I will spare your ears, ladies, and leave my quotation unfinished: but by my father's shade it is our domestic Esculapius himself;' and Hester with a bright face lifted the sleeping child and carried her out of the room.

Gerda bent over some old engravings. The fire was hot and her face burnt; she, too, had recognised the voice, the quiet voice with that timbre in it that was at once so penetrating and indescribable, and which made her pulse beat faster. Pshaw! what a goose she was! Why should the sound of a certain voice turn her breathless and giddy? She and Dr. Lyall were good friends, quite old friends now. Of course she would be glad to see him; nevertheless, Gerda shrank back into her corner, and so completely effaced herself behind the screen that Dr. Lyall's searching look round the room failed to discover her.

'I thought Hester told me Miss Meredith was here,' he said in a perplexed tone, as he shook hands with Mrs. Glyn. 'Ah, I see;' and he advanced so quickly to Gerda's corner that she had hardly time to put down the engravings. But she had noticed everything—the start, the significant tone, the pleased, friendly light in his eyes, that somehow changed and became thoughtful all at once, as they rested

on her downcast face. 'Was she going to be shy with him again?' he wondered.

'So you have come!' was all he found to say—not a very brilliant commencement to a conversation; and Gerda returned very demurely that she had long owed her Aunt Clare a visit, and that it was more convenient for her to leave home just now.

'I am very glad to see you again,' he replied, with the pleasant frankness that was natural to him; but to this Gerda made no answer. Why did she feel such a sense of rest in this man's presence? She neither desired to talk nor to hear him talk. Her eyes had a soft depth in them that seemed new to him. As he looked at her, the meaning of it all seemed to break suddenly upon him. 'Is she glad, too?' he asked himself. 'Am I only a conceited fool? Or can it be possible that she, too, is glad?' And then he sat down beside her, and talked across the room to his brother-in-law and Mrs. Glyn. 'I met Hester just outside—she was carrying Ray up to bed. You have not taken my advice, Julius. The child has certainly caught a chill. You had no business to take her out in this east wind.'

'Was the wind in the east? That is why my temper has been so bad to-day,' returned his brother-in-law lazily. Ray insisted on a drive, as she called it; and I had not the heart to refuse her. When she complained of the cold, I brought her home, so there is no harm done, my dear Medicus.'

'I am not so sure of that,' returned Dr. Lyall.—'Mrs. Glyn, I wish you would lecture this fellow. He monopolizes Ray, and leaves the boys to their mother. It ought to be the other way round, I tell him. Hester would carry out my orders about her much better.'

'She is too bracing,' murmured Julius; 'and Beauty-bright and I object to bracing. It only suits Harry and Phil—they are such hardy little chaps. By-the-bye, Alick, I told you how it would be. That beast Ludlow is making up to Harry—exchanges books with him, and fags for him at cricket. Fancy, a cad like Ludlow!'

'Ludlow!—where have I heard the name?'

'I am sure I don't know,' returned Julius irritably; 'but I suppose, if you use your eyes, you must have seen "Thomas Ludlow, Draper," up on Crown Hill. Do you think I care

for my sons to be chums with the town boys? I have threatened Harry with a thrashing if he does not cut him—and pretty sharp, too.'

'Good heavens, Vincent! how can you be so unwise?' returned Dr. Lyall, with unusual sharpness. 'What harm can it do the lads? They are not likely to know each other in later life. Of course I know Thomas Ludlow—a most respectable man. Don't be such an ass, Julius! I told you a Grammar School must be mixed, and it will never do for Harry and Phil to give themselves airs. Ludlow junior is a stout fellow, and he might object to be cut; and his wounded feelings might find expression in whacking Harry.'

'I can't help that,' returned Julius obstinately. '*Noblesse oblige*, and I cannot allow Harry to forget that he is the son of a gentleman. Hester manages the boys—she has good nerve, and does not mind their noise; but when I interfere I expect to be minded.—Am I not right, Mrs. Glyn? I appeal to you. Is not the Vicar master in his own house?'

Then Mrs. Glyn smiled and looked across at Gerda, and Dr. Lyall began to laugh.

'Julius, you really are an absurd fellow! When you take a crotchet into your head, there is no getting you to listen to reason.—We will set the Vicar to talk to him, eh, Mrs. Glyn?' Then Julius drew himself up in a dignified manner, and his smile was not as pleasant as usual. 'Mind what you are about, old man! If you make the place too hot for Harry, you will have to look out for another school.' Dr. Lyall spoke good-humouredly, but there was a certain meaning in his tone; and then he glanced at Gerda, and met a soft, amused look. 'Mrs. Glyn,' he continued, changing the subject abruptly, and ignoring his brother-in-law's sulky look, 'you have received Pamela's invitation. May we hope to see you and Miss Meredith on Monday—the Vicar, too?' he put in hastily, as though by an afterthought.

'I am afraid you must not expect my husband, he is so busy just now with his classes. Shall we say yes, Gerda?' And Gerda smiled assent.

'Thank you,' was all Dr. Lyall's answer; but his tone spoke volumes to Gerda's ears. And then Mrs. Glyn got

up, and said they must be going; it was dreadfully late—nearly six—and they had been there for hours.

Dr. Lyall followed them out into the dimly-lighted hall, and while Mr. Vincent put up the collar of his coat, and shivered ostentatiously as he opened the door, his brother-in-law quietly took down his hat from the peg.

'I am going to see these ladies home, Julius,' he observed. 'Tell Hester that I will be back in half an hour or so;' and then, in spite of a shocked protest on Mrs. Glyn's part, he went round to Gerda's side, with an observation on the roughness of the pavement in Daintree Road.

How Gerda enjoyed that walk! and yet, as she recalled it afterwards, she could not remember that Dr. Lyall had addressed her once. He had talked to Mrs. Glyn about a troublesome vestry meeting, and he had a great deal to say about a certain Job Wiggins, whose mulish obstinacy had vexed the Vicar's soul.

'What is one to do in such a case?' he observed, with energy. 'The fellow ought to have been kicked out;' and he was still on the subject of Job Wiggins when they reached the door of St. Jude's Vicarage.

'Will you come in, Dr. Lyall? My husband will be delighted to see you.'

'Not to-night, thanks,' he returned hastily; and then he shook hands with them. 'Good-night; we shall see you on Monday,' was all he said to Gerda. Nevertheless, she went up to her room with a warm, satisfied feeling, for which she could find no adequate reason.

But there was no tranquillity in Dr. Lyall's mind, as he walked rapidly through the dark streets. A sense of conflict, of turmoil, a suggestion of possible danger, alternated with a certain blissful consciousness to which he would give no name.

'Was she glad, too?' he muttered. 'She makes too much of the little service I rendered her. I could see how well she remembers it, even now. It is a sort of link between us. Tut! what a fool I am! I believe that girl, with her soft looks, has bewitched me. How is a man to escape his fate? It is Kismet. If only one could run away from danger! But now she is here——' He stopped abruptly. 'And why not—and why not, if only she would

have it so?' he thought; but he blushed like a boy in the darkness. 'After all, she has refused the rich man;' and his hand trembled a little as he rang the bell at Daintree House.

He knew where to look for his sister. Not in the studio, where Julius had now lighted his reading-lamp, and was enjoying his cigarette and a Russian novel together, and basking in the fragrant warmth like some sleek, well-conditioned animal. Hester would be casting up accounts, or correcting them, in the shabby little drawing-room, where no logs spluttered or emitted brilliant sparks. Hester's frugal, housewifely soul would not permit her to indulge in such extravagances; she burnt her coals warily. She had drawn up an easy-chair close to the fender, and her well-used blotting-book was in her lap; but at her brother's entrance she looked up with a smile of welcome.

'Dear Alick, this is so good of you!' she said, making room for him, and stirring the smouldering fire until it blazed more cheerfully. But he looked round the room with rather a dissatisfied air.

'Why do you not keep Julius company?' he asked. 'I will lay you anything that he has a glorious fire in the studio. He is a perfect salamander.'

'Julius never likes to see me doing accounts,' she returned reluctantly. 'He says it spoils the flavour of his cigar to see me harassing myself over pounds, shillings, and pence, and I hate to disturb him.'

Hester was too honest not to tell the whole truth, but she looked at Alick a little beseechingly, as though to entreat his forbearance for her husband. But Dr. Lyall was not in his usual mood.

'You are very wrong, Hester,' he said bluntly. 'You are feeding Julius's selfishness. Men are mostly selfish,' he continued, as Hester looked a little unhappy at this; 'but a good wife ought not to pander to her husband's weakness. Why should he not help you with your accounts? Why are you to work and he to play? You spoil him dreadfully, and he takes advantage of your good-humour, like the rest of the world. He is far too ready to work the willing horse.'

'I wish you were not so hard on Julius,' she returned

sorrowfully. 'You may be right, Alick—indeed, you are always right; but you cannot quite enter into a wife's feelings.'

'Can I not, Essie?' and as she heard the old pet name, there was a sudden moisture in the deep-set eyes. 'My dear, you do not know how thoroughly I do understand, but you must forgive me if I speak rather plainly. After all, Julius is your husband, and not the eldest of your children.'

Then she gave a dreary little laugh.

'Alick, you absurd boy! But, of course, I see what you mean—that I pet Julius, and give way to him, when I ought to be firm. But if you knew how difficult it is for me!'

'We all have our difficulties, Hester.'

'Yes, dear; and Pamela is your difficulty. Sometimes I think Julius and she are alike. They are both so wayward and unreasonable. But it does not make you as unhappy to thwart Pamela as it makes me when I have to deprive my poor boy of any of his little comforts. I think that is my worst trouble. I would work night and day to make Julius happy.'

If Dr. Lyall was inwardly touched at this wifely confession, he would not allow his sister to see it. On the contrary, he regarded her with the stern and slightly contemptuous look that he kept for refractory patients.

'I do not suppose your conscience applauds you, Hester,' he answered coldly. 'If you call this conjugal devotion, I should classify it as rank weakness.'

Then a gleam of anger came into Hester's eyes. She was not a meek woman; and, though she could bear a great deal from this dearly-loved brother, she considered this speech a hard one.

'Alick, you are really too bad!'

'Yes, of course, because I tell you the truth.' But his tone was a little softer. 'My dear Hester, where your husband is concerned, you are the weakest woman I know. And yet no one is really stronger. You sacrifice yourself, you slave all day—I might say night, too—for Julius and the children. You are worth them all put together, and yet in your own eyes you are nothing at all. Julius must

be comfortable, and so you dispense with comforts. A smoky fire will do for you, so that he has logs to burn in profusion. He sits in his luxurious room, pampered in soul and body, while the woman he vowed to protect is toiling to keep a roof over his head. Hester, you try my patience too much. I will not praise you for this. Let others do it if they will. I love you far too much to bolster you up with false sophistry. One day you will repent this weakness, and will be the first to tell me so. There,' rising from his chair, 'I call that a regular lecture, and I mean every word of it.'

'You have made me very unhappy,' returned Hester in a dejected tone.

Then he laughed and kissed her forehead.

'It is a wholesome blister, Essie, and I trust an effective one. Now let us change the subject. Where are the boys? Oh, I remember, it is a schoolfellow's birthday. By-the-bye, Julius talked a good deal of rubbish just now about Ludlow junior. Master Hal is to cut him, or have a sound thrashing. As I am responsible for the lad's education, you may as well let Julius know that I shall stand no nonsense.'

'No, indeed, Alick! I really will make Julius hear reason where the boys are concerned. You have a right to expect obedience.'

'Very well, then, I will leave it in your hands. Poor little lad! there was never a boy who deserved a thrashing less. If his father lays a finger on him without due reason, he will have to answer for it to me. I am Harry's sponsor; and, as far as responsibility goes, the lads are more mine than his.'

'You may trust me to put it right,' she interrupted hurriedly. 'Where the boys are concerned I am always firm. It is only Ray'—and then her lip trembled a little. She was anxious about her child, but she feared to unburden herself to her brother.

He looked at her rather sharply. 'She has another cold, eh? What a fool Julius is, to be sure! He will be the death of her one day. Never mind, I dare say it is nothing. I will look in to-morrow, and see how she is. By-the-bye, can you give Derrick a bed on Monday, or shall we put him up for once?'

'I think he had better come here.'

'So do I—so that is settled. Well, I must be going.'

But Hester did not seem willing to part with him. Her brief anger had died away. Alick had been a little rough with her, but, of course, it had been for her good. But what brother could compare with him in goodness? Was he not her prop—her mainstay? Was he not always ready to stand in the breach when she required help?

'I never want you to go,' she said affectionately, as she helped him on with his great-coat. 'We have had such a nice afternoon! Miss Meredith is a sweet girl: she is so gentle and well-bred; and though she is very quiet, she has a good deal in her.'

'Do you think so? Yes, I dare say you are right. Women generally understand each other.'

'What a hurry you are in, Alick! Do, pray, put on your gloves, or your fingers will be nipped. Yes, we had such a nice talk. Well, if you must be off——'

'I will look in to-morrow,' he responded absently.

Then, as Hester stood on the doorstep, peering out into the wintry darkness, two small figures burst through the gate, and ran up to her with a joyous war-whoop.

'We have had such a jolly afternoon, mother! and Herbert's cake was rare good stuff—cut and come again, that was the style. Was that Uncle Alick we passed just now? He did not take any notice. Bob Ludlow said it looked like him.'

'Yes, it was Uncle Alick. But, Harry, boy, just listen to me a moment. When you bid father good-night, you had better not say anything about Bob—not unless you are asked'—with a sudden fear that she might be undermining Harry's sturdy veracity.

'Father vows he will give me a thrashing if I don't give Bob up.—You heard him, Phil.—Why, only a cad would give up a chum to escape any amount of flogging. So dad need not try that on.' And Harry stuck his hands in his pockets, and looked at his mother with clear boyish eyes.

'Dad won't touch you, my son,' returned Hester calmly. 'After all, I think you had better go upstairs quietly, and I will bid him good-night for you both. Don't wake Ray; she is sleeping peacefully to-night.' And Hester kissed and blessed her boys, and dismissed them with a smile.

CHAPTER XX

WALTER'S DECISION

'Though God take the sun out of heaven, we must have patience.'—GEORGE HERBERT.

IT was Friday evening, and the Vicar was absorbed by his half-written sermon. He had left it reluctantly to take his place at the dinner-table; but he was still too abstracted to notice his wife's grave, preoccupied looks. A passage on freewill was too obscure, and he feared the whole paragraph must be rewritten. Mr. Glyn seldom wrote doctrinal sermons; he preferred to deliver brief, pungent discourses, wherein he would inveigh with terrible sternness against some nineteenth-century wickedness. The hardworked City man winced as he listened to the current of invective that rolled over his head, and wondered in his stupid, John Bull way if he were really the worldling and Mammon-worshipper at whom those hard terms were flung.

The Vicar was not much given to measure his words in the pulpit; he loved the scathing denunciations of the older prophets. Honest Thomas Ludlow waxed a little indignant as the Vicar dwelt on the moral turpitude, the double-dealing, the corruption and nepotism of the present age; illiberality, worldliness, deviation from rectitude, and the Judas kiss that betrays principle.

'The Vicar might as well have hurled a few big stones at us at once,' he grumbled as he walked home with his wife. 'Nepotism! I wonder what on earth he meant by that, Betsy? He thinks us a bad lot; but I don't know

that all this fault-finding does much for a man. It is not my business; but I should say that a soft word now and then would encourage a poor chap to do better.'

Honest Tom spoke out of the bitterness of an awakened conscience, for, strange to say, that pure and lofty standard that Horace Glyn held up before his people made them somewhat heartily ashamed of themselves. The Vicar did not spare them, but, then, he did not spare himself either: if he preached an impossible perfection to them, at least he strove, as far as human flesh and blood could strive, to live up to his preaching, and perhaps this was why the seats at St. Jude's were never empty.

Truth and earnestness seldom fail to convince men, and so it was that, in spite of his severity, Horace Glyn was more respected than Mr. Higginbotham, though the latter preached smooth Evangelical sermons, of almost honeyed sweetness.

So for once Mr. Glyn failed to notice his wife's sad, tired face, and it was only Walter who cast anxious glances at his mother from time to time. Could Mrs. Vincent have said anything? Walter's face grew a little hot as he bent over his plate, and then he looked at his father and shivered.

When dinner was over, the Vicar went back to his study, and Walter betook himself to his bedroom. He had some Greek to prepare for his tutor, and the warm drawing-room and the girls' chatter would hardly conduce to help him with his work; so he wrapped himself up in an old ulster, and, lighting his gas, sat down to his books with a dogged determination to do his duty.

He had scarcely opened his Sophocles, before a light tap at his door brought the flush to his brow. How well he knew that firm, light knock, that always prefaced some loving ministry! But this evening what could his mother want with him? Of course he knew. Mrs. Vincent had certainly spoken!

'Come in, little mother!' he shouted, determined to put a good face on it; and Clare, with a sigh as she passed Willie's empty bed, stepped up to her boy and began to ruffle his hair with tender fingers. 'Oh, Walter!' was all she said; but the young man understood her—those slender fingers toying with his hair were eloquent enough.

'Little mother,' he said again, leaning back in his chair to receive the kiss that he knew would follow her words, 'have you come to talk to me? But you will catch cold,' for the attic was large and draughty; 'is there nowhere else?' Then, as she shook her head, he took off his ulster and wrapped it round her.

'Oh no, Walter,' trying to resist; but his strong arms were round her, pinioning her to her seat.

'Why, what nonsense!' he exclaimed. 'Do you think I am not tough enough to bear a little cold? After all, I am my father's son.' Then she submitted, and he sat down beside her on his bed with his arm still round her.

'Mother!' he said with youthful abruptness, 'of course I know why you look so grave. Mrs. Vincent has been talking to you.'

Then Mrs. Glyn looked at him very sadly.

'Do you think that I ought to have heard it first from her? Why have you feared to trust your mother, Walter?'

'I have never feared my mother,' he returned, with an affectionate pressure.

But she drew back slightly.

'You have feared your father, then?'

'No, mother, not in the way you mean. As far as that goes, I fear no man;' and even at that moment Clare thrilled with pride and tenderness. When Walter held up his head and spoke in that determined way, he looked every inch a Hamlyn. Oh, how handsome he was! 'Goodly, and of a fair countenance.' How she loved those old Biblical phrases! And he was her first-born. 'The only thing I feared was to give pain to my parents,' finished the poor young fellow, with tears in his eyes.

Then Clare's maternal heart yearned over her boy.

'Yes, I know,' fondling his hand. 'Hester has told me all. Walter, I do not want to be hard with you, but I must own this has grieved me terribly. Your poor father, it will be such a blow to him! All these years the thought of your entering the priesthood has been such a joy to us both.'

'Mother,' returned Walter, springing to his feet and standing before her as she sat pale and drooping, with the

old ulster falling from her shoulders, 'you must listen to me. When I was a boy—a mere lad—my father's will was law to me; I never thought resistance possible, it would have seemed to me utter rebellion. When he took me out with him, he would talk to me of his wish that I should go to Oxford and take Orders. I do not remember that he ever asked me what my own wishes were. Perhaps it was as well at that early age—for I had literally no opinion on the subject. "My father says I am to be a clergyman"—I have said that to my school-fellows a score of times.'

'Will you not sit down, Walter? We must talk over this very quietly.'

'Yes, presently, mother; but I must be on my feet for a little, I can talk so much more easily. Now do you follow me? Do you see that it is only since I have become a man that I know what is best for me?'

'You are only nineteen now,' with a faint smile.

'True; but at nineteen one can dare to say that one's soul is one's own—not my father's, but my own soul;' and there was a trace of Horace Glyn's sternness in his son's voice. 'I speak strongly,' as she winced at this, 'because I feel strongly. As I told Mrs. Vincent, no one has a right to decide my future. I have thought over things, and I have made up my mind that I cannot take Orders. Let Willie have my chance: he has got plenty of brains. It is not my fault if my tastes and pursuits are quite different from my father's. Do you know how I hate the idea of Oxford, with its endless books, lectures, and chapels? What I want is freedom and an open-air life There is no room for a fellow here! Let me go away and find work: in Canada, New Zealand, Queensland — anywhere out of England.'

Then she caught his arm with a little cry. Her lip quivered so that she could hardly speak, and her 'Sit down, Walter,' came with the force of a sob.

He sat down beside her, as though the sight of her agitation subdued him.

'I will not go, if you do not wish it,' he said slowly, as though every word were wrung from him.

Then she choked back her tears:

'Yes, Walter, you shall go, though it breaks my heart to

part with you! Do you think mothers do not prefer their children's happiness to their own? Don't look so downcast, my dear. I will speak to your father—I will make him see with your eyes. I have never yet measured my will against his with success; but this time it will be different, for it is my boy's will, not mine—and, after all, he is no tyrant.'

And then she laid her head against his shoulder and wept a little, while he caressed her and called her 'his good little mother.'

'You are not hurt with me for wanting to go away?' he pleaded anxiously when she had recovered her calmness—they had had a little silent contest again over the ulster, but now she was wrapped in it. 'You know that I never really want to leave you; only there is no room for me here.'

'No, dear, I quite understand. Mr. Vincent's title is so true: "The thoughts of youth are long, long thoughts;"' and she laughed a little hysterically. 'I know I can trust my boy, that he can be as good a Christian, as pure and true and manly, in New Zealand as here under our roof;' and then she paused and looked at him very solemnly, and the memory of that look, so sweet and penetrating, remained with him for many a long year. 'You will not disappoint me, my son?'

'No, mother, God helping me, I will not disappoint you,' was his fervent answer.

Then she rose a little stiffly and laid aside her warm covering with a smile.

'I am going to your father now,' she said as he opened the door for her. 'Do not wait up for me, I may be late; but I will try and see you again.'

'I shall not close my eyes until you come,' was his parting assurance; but he was wrong, and she had to rouse him from his dreams to give him his father's message.

The Vicar was still at work, but he was growing a little weary of his task. He had just been quoting Locke: 'That which has the power, or not the power to operate, is that alone which is, or is not free,' and so on; but at his wife's entrance he laid aside his pen with a sigh of relief.

'Where have you been, Clare?' he asked. 'The girls have gone to bed; they could not think what had become

of you.' Then, as she came forward and he saw the traces of tears on her face, he felt a sort of shock go through him. Any pain of hers touched him keenly, and as he took her cold hand in his, he said very gently: 'What is it, Clare? Tell me what or who has grieved you.' And yet when she whispered 'Walter' he stared at her incredulously 'Walter—our boy Walter!' and he almost laughed. Since the day he first saw him in his mother's arms, that boy had never given them a moment's uneasiness. 'He is a good lad,' he muttered, 'as good a lad as ever lived.'

'I am not going to contradict you,' she returned, feeling almost happy as she heard this praise. 'What has happened is not Walter's fault; he cannot fight against nature.'

Then Horace Glyn's face grew a little set and hard. His wife was not a woman to shed tears over trifles. She had something grievous to tell him, something that he must brace himself up to bear.

'Will you not sit and get warm first?' he said. And this thoughtfulness for her comfort nearly upset her.

'Oh, I shall soon be warm, you have such a nice fire. But it was terribly cold in Walter's room. I am quite ready to tell you, Horace;' and then, without any demur, he set himself to listen.

Mrs. Glyn stated the whole matter very briefly and simply. She knew her husband well enough not to waste time by copious annotations. Most women would have interwoven their own thoughts and feelings with the narrative; there would have been marginal references and pitiful little interjections. But Clare had had her lessons very early in her married life. Before their short honeymoon had ended, some sad story reached her ears. The girl had been a favourite maid at the Hall, and Clare had relieved her feelings as she told the miserable tale by fierce youthful denunciations against the serpent in human guise who had tempted her poor Annie. She was on the brink of tears when she paused.

'Is it not dreadful, Horace?'

'Yes, dear, but the story is a very old one.'

'But what are we to do? I cannot and will not desert that poor creature. Surely you will help me, Horace?' gazing into her husband's unexpressive face.

'When you are calmer, my love, and can talk like a reasonable woman, we will see what can be done for Annie.' And he had actually taken up his pen, and the next moment was immersed in his sermon.

It was a harsh lesson, and the young wife never forgot it. Nevertheless, when poor Annie died with her thin hand clasped in her young mistress's, almost her last words invoked a blessing on the head of Horace Glyn.

'But for him I should not be dying in peace,' she gasped; 'may God bless him for all he has done for me!'

So Clare talked about her boy with forced calmness, but as her husband listened his face became more set and stern, and when she had finished he drew a deep breath, and walked to the window, as though the room were too close for him. Clare watched him, but she did not speak again; her eyes were wet, and she clasped her hands tightly together. Presently he came back to her, and sat down in his place.

'It is all my fault, Clare.'

'Oh, my dear, you must not say that! Anything but that.'

'Why must I not say what is true? Would my God humble me in this way if I had served Him more faithfully —if I had set Walter a better example—if I had walked more consistently? "The path of the just is like a shining light"—do you remember that was my first sermon, Clare? Light should attract—should warm and nourish. I have borne myself so in my daily life that my boy has been repelled by me.'

'Horace, this is dreadful! You shall not blame yourself. My children may be proud of having such a father.' Clare had crept closer to him, and her eyes were full of a wife's devotion. With all his faults, he was the beloved of her heart—the man whom she delighted to honour. My own darling, you shall not talk so!' and then a softer gleam came into his eyes.

'It is such a bitter disappointment to me, Clare.'

'And to me, too.'

'My dear, do you think I do not know that? Are you not a part of myself, and are not my sorrows yours? Truly, we are led in paths that we have not known. Who could

have imagined that our boy—our good, dutiful son—would have brought this trouble upon us!'

'Dear Horace, we must try not to consider it a trouble. Walter will do his duty wherever he is, and if he has no vocation——' But here she paused, as though stricken to silence by the terrible sadness in her husband's eyes. She had seen him in these moods before, when he would morbidly exaggerate some disaster that had come upon him, and declare all things were against him; but her sympathy had never failed to cheer him. He was a man somewhat prone to depression; his very strength and force of character seemed to lead him to greater heights and depths than weaker men. Clare understood him perfectly. She knew that his heart had been set on this thing with a tenacity of purpose that would have hewed down any obstacles. How gladly, how joyously, he had stinted himself, that Walter should go to Oxford! He had laughed almost with scorn when Clare had condoled with him on some small deprivation. Why, he had absolutely gloried in it! He would have shorn himself of every comfort for his boy's sake.

'When Walter is ordained, he must preach his first sermon at St. Jude's,' he had said once to his wife. 'I shall be ready to sing my Nunc Dimittis then.'

But in this he was wrong. There was no man less willing to lay aside his work; if possible, he would die in harness.

When Clare had faltered over her last sentence, he had finished it himself.

'No vocation! That is easily said. How is a lad of that age to pronounce such a verdict on himself? Do you recollect those Divine words—"This kind goeth not out but by prayer and fasting"? What ordeal has Walter set himself? Has he ever spoken to me of his reluctance? Has he ever asked me to help him? But no; he has no confidence in his father.'

'You are wrong,' replied Clare with energy; 'you are looking on the dark side. Walter is reserved—he takes after you, Horace; it is not easy for him to speak of his feelings. He is only nineteen, remember. At that age a lad will often confide in a woman. Hester has been his friend, not I; but all the same I must take his part. You

will give him his way, will you not?' she went on pleadingly. 'His life must not be spoiled because we want to keep him with us, Horace. It will nearly break my heart to part with him, but we must let him go.'

Then the Vicar looked at his wife very kindly.

'Bravely spoken, my Clare! Yes, you are right; the lad shall have his will. Am I to be the arbiter of my boy's fate? Is it for me to say, "Go, work in the vineyard," when all such work is distasteful to him? But all the same'—in a dejected tone—'the crowning glory of my life has faded into nothingness.'

'What message shall I give him from you?'

But at this practical question Mr. Glyn roused himself effectually.

'I will send him no message, Clare. Let him come to me, and we will talk it out like men.'

'But surely you will allow me to speak a word of comfort. The poor boy is troubling sadly about us both.'

'Then tell him that he may yoke and plough with his oxen if he will—that he may thatch his own roof, and sleep under it, since he will have no roof of my providing.'

'I think Walter deserves a kinder message than that,' replied his wife gently.

She had been very patient with him, but her exhausted voice gave warning that the strain on her feelings was too heavy. Then, as his keen ear noted the tremulousness, Horace Glyn obeyed the promptings of his good heart.

'I spoke hastily, Clare. I had no right to burden you with such a message. Give my love to Walter, and tell him that I am grievously disappointed, but that he shall have his will. Let him come to me to-morrow, and we will discuss ways and means. I have laid by a few pounds to pay his fees, and they will furnish him with an outfit. He shall not go out from his father's house a beggar. You may as well let him know this.'

Then Clare thanked him with glistening eyes, and withdrew to her boy's room to give him so welcome a message.

CHAPTER XXI

'HAVE YOU SETTLED ANYTHING, HORACE?'

'Life is an art in which one too often remains a mere amateur. Without spilling the heart's blood it is impossible to become a master.'—ELIZABETH OF ROUMANIA.

GERDA heard everything from her aunt's lips the next morning. Bessie had gone down to the school, and they two were sitting together. As she talked, Mrs. Glyn's hands were busy with a shirt of Walter's that needed mending, but Gerda's work lay in her lap untouched.

'No wonder you look tired, Aunt Clare,' she observed presently.

'Yes, dear, I feel utterly jaded. I do not believe I closed my eyes until morning. Even when I fell asleep I dreamt that we were at the docks. I could even hear the throbbing of the engines, and the black hull of the vessel that was to carry him away was distinctly visible. When I told your Uncle Horace so in the morning he was quite angry, and said it was nonsense.'

'Well, you see, there is nothing really settled. Walter and Uncle Horace are only talking now.'

'But all the same, your uncle is not a man to let the grass grow under his feet. If a thing has to be done, he thinks it best to do it quickly, and Walter is just as impetuous. I had a little talk with him myself this morning while we were waiting for breakfast, and it appears that there is an opening for him if he chooses to take it. Rupert Johnston, who is going out to Queensland, is a

cousin of Mr. Harding's, and it appears that Walter met him at The Briars last summer. He is going to start a large sheep-farm, and he would be willing to take Walter if we could furnish the outfit and pay his passage. It seems that they had some talk together, and Walter is wild to accompany him.'

'What sort of man is Mr. Johnston?'

'A thoroughly good fellow, so Walter assures me—only he has just lost his wife and is in bad spirits; that is why he wants to live out of England. Another connection of Sam Harding's is going out, too; he is rather a delicate youth, and just Walter's age: they call him "Dick," I believe—Dick Thornton.'

'It sounds rather nice.'

'If they were not the Hardings' belongings,' sighed Clare. 'Somehow, The Briars is a veritable abode of briars to me. It was Emma who induced Sam to give Horace that presentation to Christ Hospital for Willie; and now this Queensland scheme was first mooted at The Briars. I suppose I ought not to speak against poor Mr. Johnston—from Walter's account he seems a very pleasant man. If he were only not Sam's cousin!' And then she laughed a little over her own unreasonableness.

'There are cousins *and* cousins,' remarked Gerda oracularly, and then her conscience smote her as she remembered Gerard.

She had heard from her mother and Doris by that morning's post. Her mother's letter had been rather a melancholy effusion. Sir Godfrey had been very trying, and his long-suffering daughter had not found her life a very pleasant one.

'Gerard does not humour him sufficiently,' she wrote; 'but, then, young men have so little patience. I dare say he resents your treatment of him, and so he is less sweet-tempered than usual.'

Doris's voluminous epistle had been far more cheering. She owned Grand was a trifle crotchety, but no one minded it except mother. As for Gerard, he was as good as gold. Bonnie Bell was all right again, and Gerard had promised her no end of rides.

'He is really as nice as possible,' she went on, 'and he

seems to like my doing things for him. Yesterday, when he was over at Harburton, I tidied the den for him, and put everything in order. You should have seen his pleased face when he put his head in at the door; he called me a good, dear little Doey. Of course he misses you; and at times he seems low and not quite like himself, but he tries hard not to let us see it. I want you too, dreadfully, darling—your room does look so lonely. Gerard is so good to Waif; he lets him go out with the other dogs: and the other day I found him asleep by the hall fire, and Gerard would not let me turn him out. Even Waif is sacred in his eyes now; do you see that! you hard-hearted girl! But there, you shall not be scolded, and I am, as ever,

'Your loving little DORRIE.'

'Poor little soul! how devoted she is to him!' thought Gerda. 'I wonder if Gerard will ever find it out. Perhaps if they are left together for a long time he will discover for himself how sweet and good she is. Doris is very simple and childish, and she is not clever; but she has more in her than people think. Doris would go through fire and water for anyone she loved. Oh, the irony of fate!' finished the girl as she put aside the letter. 'If Gerard would only find it out for himself! I am sure Doris would make him the dearest little wife in the world.'

Gerda was roused from her reverie the next moment by her uncle and Walter entering the room. Mrs. Glyn looked at them wistfully, but she asked no question.

The talk between the father and son had evidently been an agitating one. Walter looked flushed and excited as he sat down beside his mother and began to play with her reels of cotton; but Mr. Glyn took up his usual position on the hearthrug: the cloud upon his brow had lifted a little, and his voice insensibly softened as he addressed his wife:

'Well, my dear, Walter and I have had our talk.'

'It has been a long one, Horace.'

'Long? Yes, perhaps you are right. But Walter has had to make up for past arrears,' and as the Vicar made this dreary little joke, the young man winced slightly. 'If he had only shown a little moral courage, and this conversation

had taken place a year ago—but it is too late to think of that now.'

'You are right, dear; it is far too late to think of that.'

'But, all the same,' returned Mr. Glyn quickly, 'it was my duty to point out to him that he has wasted my substance. Should I have provided a tutor for him if I had guessed that he would rather lead the life of a ploughman than construe Greek? If he had only opened his mind to me, or at least to you!' And then Mr. Glyn paused. This upbraiding was a relief to his wounded paternal feelings, but it would not be wise to indulge in it too freely.

'Have you settled anything, Horace?' asked his wife gently.

'No, my dear, not yet; but Walter has told me all about the Queensland scheme, and as far as I can judge at present it offers decided advantages.' Then Clare shivered and clasped her hands together convulsively under her work.

'It is very far,' she faltered: 'Horace, it is the other end of the world.'

'I am afraid we must not consider that; other parents have to part with their sons. If Walter had chosen to work with his uncle——' Then a flush crossed Clare's pale face.

'No, no; not that,' she murmured. 'I could not see my eldest son a tradesman.'

'I think I know your ideas on this point,' returned her husband dryly. 'Walter takes after you, my dear; he is more a Hamlyn than a Glyn.' Then Clare sighed as her quick ears detected his offended tones. 'It is always understood between us, is it not, that my family are not equal to yours?' Then Gerda quietly took up her work and left the room. When her uncle spoke in that tone it was difficult for her to keep silence.

'Do not speak in that way, Horace,' returned his wife with tears in her eyes. 'What does your family matter to me? Can any husband or father be more honoured or obeyed than you have been? You must not be angry with me because my bringing up has been so different.' Then Mr. Glyn's stiff-necked pride relaxed a little. He had always been a little sore on this subject; but such is the contradiction of human nature, that he had no desire that either of his sons should follow in their uncle's footsteps.

'You need not fear that Sam will ever repeat his offer,' he said quietly; 'but if you are raising obstacles to this Queensland scheme, it is my duty to tell you that I can see no opening for Walter in England. I am not rich enough to send him to an agricultural college or to stock a farm for him, and engineering offers him no attraction. If he desires freedom and an open-air life, he cannot do better than join Mr. Johnston—that is,' looking at her keenly, 'if you can bring yourself to part with him.'

'I will agree to whatever he and you think best,' she replied in a low voice. Then Walter furtively squeezed her hand.

'Thank you, my dear, that is well said; then I will tell you what I propose to do. Sam will be in town on Monday, and Walter and I will go up and have a talk with him. Perhaps we shall see Mr. Johnston, too.'

'Yes, Horace,' but she could say no more; she was only conscious that a strong warm young hand was grasping hers. She was going to lose her boy, she knew that. Well, Horace would waste no time; in a day or two it would be all settled.

'I have told Walter that he shall have all the help that I can give him,' went on the Vicar, in the tone of a man who had set himself a difficult task; 'he shall have the portion that I have been laying by for him, but he must be prudent and careful; by and by there will be Willie to consider;' but here he was interrupted.

'I have told father that I will repay him every farthing,' interposed Walter eagerly. 'I will not defraud Willie; he has more brains than I ever had, and he loves his books. Father,' speaking with hot impetuosity, 'what does it matter whether it be the eldest or the youngest?—Willie will not disappoint you. I think I take after my cousin Gerard,' continued the lad; 'he hated books, too, and he only cares for sport and an open-air life. It seems to me one cannot help one's nature; one can struggle for a time, but in the long-run one is sure to be beaten.'

'You have not struggled long, my boy;' but the Vicar's tone was a kindly one. In spite of his pain and disappointment, it was a relief to Horace Glyn to feel that the barrier was broken down between him and Walter. The boy's

reticence and utter absence of response had often chilled him. An eldest son should be his father's friend and companion, he thought; but hitherto Walter had held himself aloof from him. Henceforth he would never misunderstand his boy again. The seal of silence had been taken off the young man's lips, and for once in his life they had talked together like friends.

'Father has been a brick!' exclaimed Walter presently, when he found himself alone with his mother. 'He was a little bit touchy about Uncle Sam just now; but in his heart he was siding with us all the time. Mother, he was so awfully good to me; I think I never knew any one quite so good! One could see how cut up he was about it all, and when I talked about Willie going to Oxford he seemed as though he could hardly take any interest. "Willie is not my eldest son," he said; and then he checked himself and began to talk about ways and means.'

'I am glad you understand your father at last, Walter,' she said a little sadly; and then she folded up her work. 'I must go now, my dear. By and by we will talk about this again, and you shall tell me what I am to do for you.' And he reluctantly let her go. Clare hurried away to her own room and closed her door, and then she fell upon her knees She wanted neither of them just now, neither her husband's bracing and support, nor her boy's affection; her wounded heart needed other comfort.

Oh, the agony of such moments, when one looks into the black abysses of some dreaded future, some threatened parting, which will be like the sundering of soul and body!

'Do mothers bring their children into the world for this?' was her inward cry, as she knelt there tearless but stricken. 'If Walter goes, who knows whether I shall see him again? I have not felt strong lately, and all these cares age one.' But who can follow the conflicting thoughts and emotions of a strong loving nature battling with its own selfishness and striving for a painful self-mastery? When Clare rose, she was no longer weak; she would forget herself and think only of her boy. She must work for him, toil for him; there would be plenty of time to fret afterwards. The memory he must carry away with him of his mother must be a bright one, and Clare nobly acted up to her resolution.

It was this mixture of sweetness and strength—of womanly softness with a high spirit—that had first won Horace Glyn's love, and which had satisfied his lofty ideal of womanhood. Her nature was in some respects larger than his; but he had taught her both by precept and example to live on the high plane of duty.

Gerda was surprised as well as relieved when she came down to luncheon and saw her looking much the same as usual, and talking to Bessie about the afternoon's employment.

'Pamela is to go with me to my district, and Bessie is to spend the afternoon at the Robertsons'. I am afraid we must leave you to your own devices, Gerda.'

'Then I think I shall go out for a walk, Aunt Clare. What a pity Nora and Janie are not here; how they would enjoy showing me their favourite haunts! They always make me tell them stories when we are out. Do you recollect, Bessie, that horrible story of the Bogie's Castle that I evolved out of my inner consciousness, and how the postman coming out of the fog made Nora scream, because she said his eyes glared so—like Bogie Brummager's?'

'Do you always deal in the horribles, Gerda?' returned her aunt, smiling. 'What a good thing your uncle is not listening! He is very tyrannical, as Pamela calls it, on the subject of children's tales. Come, Bessie, we must not waste time. Will you return thanks, Horace?' And Clare left the room, only, as she passed Walter, her hand touched his shoulder caressingly. 'You will walk with your father, will you not?' she said; and he nodded.

Gerda was not sorry to be alone this afternoon. She was fond of her own company, and though she would hardly have agreed with Carlyle when he exclaimed in his dominant way, 'A school for public speaking! I wish we had a school for private thought,' her thoughts were full of interest.

A sort of instinct made her avoid the town. Dr. Lyall would be out on his afternoon rounds, and the idea of his crossing her path made her feel hot and shy. It was a cold, bleak afternoon, and she must walk fast to keep herself warm. She would go down by the cemetery, and turn into the Twyford Road. The neighbourhood was uninteresting, but she would be sure of not meeting anyone she knew;

and then she asked herself a little distrustfully if she were not becoming very self-conscious.

Before Gerda had gone many yards, however, she saw a lady in a long gray cloak a little way before her. She was rather tall, and she walked in a quick, business-like way, as though time were precious to her. As Gerda's footsteps came up behind her she turned slightly, as though to allow her to pass, and under the close, Quakerish gray bonnet Gerda saw the dark, strong features of Hester Vincent.

'I had no idea it was you whom I was following!' she exclaimed, in a pleased tone.

'I dare say not,' returned Mrs. Vincent, smiling; 'the disguise—as my husband calls it—prevents all recognition. But you have no idea how I love my old gray cloak; it has kept me warm for many a winter. I am very conservative even in clothes, Miss Meredith, and like old friends best.'

Gerda was much amused at this speech; she thought Mrs. Vincent must be rather strong-minded. No one but a beautiful woman could afford to neglect her appearance; and the old gray cloak and close bonnet made Hester look like some gaunt Sister of Mercy.

'When I walk with my husband I dare not wear this,' she went on; 'but I hope you will not be ashamed to be seen with me—we seem going the same way. I want to inquire after a little pupil who is very ill. Have you any special object for your walk?'

'Oh dear no! I am only taking a constitutional.'

'How odd that sounds!' returned Hester, in her deep, musical voice. 'My walks are never objectless, and my one idea is to get over the ground as fast as I can. As your aunt remarked yesterday, I am a very busy woman.'

'I suppose your school gives you a great deal of work?'

'Yes, the school and the house and the children. Unfortunately, we are not rich people, and my establishment is not a large one. There are days when I have scarcely time to take my meals. Alick says I shall never grow fat.'

'I think he must be sorry to see you work so hard.'

'Alick?—well, yes. But then he knows it is my own fault. I am talking to you, Miss Meredith, as though we were old friends; but you remind me so much of your aunt. My brother was very much against my marriage—neither

my husband nor I had any money—but we were very much in love, and preferred poverty to separation.'

'I hardly think you were wrong,' returned Gerda thoughtfully; 'but, of course, from your brother's point of view——' And then she stopped rather abruptly. She must not betray his confidence; she remembered every word that he had spoken about his sister.

'Yes, Alick was right; but all the same, if the choice were to be given me again, I should do the same thing. What is poverty, and hard work, and disappointment, compared to the sorrow of parting with one we love? I am a bad adviser on this point. When any of my girls come to consult me, I give them the worst possible counsel. One of my old pupils came to me the other day to ask my advice. "If you love this young man," I said to her, "and he be willing to work hard, do not give him up. Marriage is not for life only—it is for eternity, and it is better for two to travel together than to go alone." When I told Alick this, he was quite angry. He said the girl was very delicate, that she was used to softness and every kind of luxury, and that she had not the right grit in her—that was how he put it; but all the same, I hold to my opinion.'

'I am rather glad to hear that. I like people to have strong opinions.'

'Well, so do I; but I could never convince Alick. He is very tenacious—in other words, obstinate. He would not give me away; he said his conscience would not allow him to do it. But do you know how good he is to us? He is educating my boys. Harry and Phil will owe everything to their uncle. No wonder I think there is no one like Alick, and that I take his part when Pamela vexes him.'

'I suppose you see a great deal of your sister?'

But Hester shook her head.

'On the contrary, I see very little of her. Pamela has odd ideas on most subjects. She will have it that even sisters may see too much of each other; so she comes very seldom to Daintree House. She and my husband are great cronies, and, for Julius' sake, I wish she would bestow more of her company on us.'

'And yet you are her only sister?'

'Yes; but we are very unlike. The only point on which

Pamela and I agree is about matrimony. Pamela endorses my opinions very strongly. She would marry Derrick Vincent to-morrow if he would ask her to do so, and share his two garrets with the utmost cheerfulness—indeed, she would be happier in doing so; but neither he nor Alick will hear of it.'

'I dare say he thinks it wiser to wait a little?'

'Yes, he vows he will bring no woman to poverty, and that he and Pamela must wait until he can provide a decent roof to cover her. When Pamela scoffs at this worldly prudence, he quotes my example as a warning text. "Look at Hester," I have heard him say; "she was a buxom young woman thirteen years ago, and now she is a wreck. Do you think I am the sort of man to look on while my sweetheart works her pretty fingers to the bone? No, no; we will bide a wee, until I have feathered my nest."'

'Dr. Lyall would call this common-sense.'

'Yes; and he thinks so highly of Derrick. When Pamela's wedding-day comes he will not refuse to give her away; but Pamela declares that that day will never come.'

'Why not?'

'Ah, why not? That is what I ask her. When Derrick makes these pretty speeches to her she never answers him at all, but now and then she will come and rage to me with tears in her eyes. She is a foolish lassie, I tell her, to get such notions into her head; but she will have it that his love is Laodicean—neither cold nor hot—that he has neither the energy nor affection to risk poverty for her sake; and she lets this distrust spoil the happiness of their engagement. Derrick is to be pitied, for his lady-love leads him a life.'

'If she thinks of him in this way, would it not be better to break off her engagement? Surely want of faith in his affection is the greatest insult she can offer him.'

'You had better tell her so. I am tired of taking Derrick's part. He is honestly in love with her, and he will make her a happy woman some day. But she must not try him too much: the Vincents have strong wills. Ah, here we are at my pupil's house. I will only inquire at the door, and then we will retrace our steps. Why, there is Alick's brougham! That looks bad—he has been to see

Olive once this morning. Shall you mind walking up and down for a few minutes until I join you?' and Hester, with rather a grave face, opened the heavy iron gate.

The idea of a child battling with the mighty forces of life and death made her heart ache. Alick had told her once that Ray would never grow up to be a woman, but she had not repeated those words to her husband. Hester's broad shoulders bore Julius' burdens as well as her own; if she could help it, the winds of heaven should not blow too coldly on her beloved. Now and then she had her hours of weakness, when she longed for comfort: if she sought it vainly from the man she loved, if he offered her only light husks instead of food, she never reproached him; she kept those firm, sweet lips closed and smothered up her pain. Julius was Julius, and she must take him as he was, and make the best of him.

CHAPTER XXII

HESTER'S LITTLE PUPIL

'Show me what thou truly lovest, show me what thou seekest and strivest for with thy whole heart, when thou hopest to attain to true enjoyment, and thou hast thereby shown me thy life. What thou lovest is that thou livest. This very love is thy life, the root, the seat, the central-point of thy being.'—FICHTE.

GERDA walked up and down for more than ten minutes; the cold was growing intense, and a few snowflakes were powdering the roads. February was more like December that year, and weather-wise people were predicting a return of the frost; the winter promised to be long as well as severe, but Gerda seemed quite impervious to the cold and gathering dusk.

Her talk with Hester had warmed and refreshed her, and she was looking forward to their walk home.

'If she keep me much longer waiting the snow will overtake us; and as I have no umbrella, that will hardly be pleasant.' But as this thought crossed her mind she heard Mrs. Vincent's voice behind her.

'Here she is, Alick!' and Gerda turned quickly as the brother and sister hurried after her.

Dr. Lyall shook hands with her silently; he had a grave, abstracted look, and Hester had evidently been crying.

'She has gone, poor little darling!' she said huskily. 'Dear little Olive died an hour ago. Oh, the pity of it, Miss Meredith! She was the only child—think of the poor father and mother!'

'You must not keep Miss Meredith standing in this cold, Hester;' and Dr. Lyall's tone was a trifle brusque, probably because he was tired and harassed. 'Let me put you both into the brougham, and then I will walk on.'

'Alick will insist on our driving home,' explained Hester. 'He says we shall have a heavy fall of snow directly, and as he has finished his work, a walk will do him good.'

'I could not hear of such a thing,' returned Gerda, very decidedly. 'Why should you not drive with your brother, Mrs. Vincent? But I would much rather walk.'

'Well, so would I,' observed Dr. Lyall curtly. 'So jump in, Hester! The mare wants to get to her stable, and Evans wants his tea.'

'Do you mean to say that in any case you intend to walk?' asked Gerda, a little astonished at this.

'Certainly I do; and if you do not object to my company——' But Gerda interrupted him rather hurriedly.

'Then in that case I think I will drive with your sister.'

'Certainly, that would be a more sensible proceeding;' and Dr. Lyall's tone was slightly ironical. He had got his way, as usual, and Gerda felt rather small as she seated herself beside Mrs. Vincent. She even forgot to thank him, or say good-bye, as he closed the door; but he did not seem to notice the omission. They were safe and warm, these two dear women, and the walk would do him no harm. How alarmed and shy Miss Meredith had looked as he proposed accompanying her! She reminded him of a young fawn, with her small head and great startled eyes. He liked to see her with Hester. Hester would understand and appreciate her; she—— He stopped himself, looked after the fast-retreating brougham, buttoned up his thick coat, and then thought of the sad scene in the room yonder.

Of what avail was all his skill and knowledge? He could not save the child. How limited had seemed his resources; how inadequate his weapons to repel that grisly foe, the fell disease that had carried off little Olive.

'Don't look sorry, doctor.' The child had actually gasped out those words as he bent over her. Had he looked more grave than usual? Had his intense professional anxiety communicated itself to the little sufferer? How he

had longed to help her! but his only part had been to stand there with his hand above the faint pulse, as the long-drawn breaths grew more laboured, until they ceased. No wonder there had been that look of care on his brow, as he had put Gerda in the brougham, and had set out on this solitary walk; he was a man as well as a doctor, and these scenes always tried him.

'It is too bad,' complained Gerda, as they drove rapidly down the dark road; 'it is almost cruel that your brother should have this long, cold walk after his hard day's work. But what could I do? He allowed me no choice.'

'And he was quite right,' returned Hester, who was furtively wiping her eyes under cover of the darkness. 'He managed you very cleverly. Alick always gets his way, Miss Meredith—that is what his patients say; but they never disobey him. They like him much better than they do Dr. Brown, though Dr. Brown gives in to their whims.'

Gerda made no reply; her thoughts were following the patient, plodding footsteps on the Twyford Road. Why had she not thanked him, or wished him good-night? He had looked so dull and tired, and if he had refused to give her her own way it was for her good. How she would have revelled in that walk in his company! She would never see him alone now, and there would be no possibility of enjoying one of those long, quiet talks. When the carriage stopped, she bade Mrs. Vincent good-bye in rather a subdued voice.

'If you see Dr. Lyall, will you tell him that I was not ungrateful for his kindness?' she said. And Hester undertook this commission very readily; but it so happened that she did not see her brother again that night.

She was cold, and she went into the studio a moment to warm herself, and forgetting for once to lay aside the obnoxious cloak.

Julius looked up from his book, and a frown contracted his brow.

'Ah, Hester, that abominable cloak!' he observed peevishly. 'How many times have I begged you not to make such a scarecrow of yourself? Is there any reason why you should look a positive fright?'

Julius was in a bad humour, that was evident, and in

such moods he required skilful treatment; but Hester, full of sorrow for her little pupil, was less observant than usual.

'Never mind the cloak, dear,' she said quickly.

Hester had never been sensitive about her appearance; her want of beauty had never troubled her. Julius had loved her in spite of her plainness, and had found some strange fascination in her sweet dark face. In their early married life he had been very exacting on the subject of her dress; but of late years he had grown more careless, perhaps because Ray had absorbed his attention. So Hester wore her old gowns unrebuked, and took advantage of her liberty to stint herself of everything but bare necessaries.

'But I do mind it,' he returned irritably. 'Do you think I want my wife to look like a market-woman? If you will not buy yourself a proper mantle, I will order you one when I go up to town;' and Julius would have carried out this threat, and both mantle and bill would have found their way to Hester, but she interrupted him in an alarmed voice.

'Oh, Julius! And my jacket is not two years old yet! You forget, dear, you chose it for me yourself. It was not quite warm enough for such a bitter day; but I will wear it another time. I would rather risk taking cold than have you buy another; we could not afford to pay for it. Indeed, indeed, Julius, our balance is very low.'

Then an exclamation of annoyance came to his lips.

'Always the same old story, Hester—money, money, nothing but money!'

'Darling, someone must face it, and I dare not hide the truth from you; but we will not talk of that now. Julius, dear little Olive Davidson is dead.'

'Olive! Do you mean that pretty little fair-haired girl who sat to me for "Little Red Riding-hood"?'

'Yes, dear; is it not grievous? I went to inquire this afternoon, and Miss Meredith accompanied me. Alick was there, and he sent us home in his brougham. She was the Davidsons' only child, and they say the poor mother is almost distracted. Alick looked quite cut up about it. Oh, Julius,' and here Hester's eyes were streaming, 'think if it were our little Ray!' and she glanced at the couch where the child lay asleep, with her pet kitten in her arms.

She was kneeling on the rug, and as she spoke she leant a little heavily against him; but he sprang so suddenly to his feet that she almost lost her balance.

'What has Ray got to do with it?' he exclaimed petulantly. 'Because one woman loses her child, is there any reason why that should affect us? Why do you put these miserable ideas into my head?' he continued, walking up and down the room. 'I was quite comfortable until you came—first with your everlasting bugbears of poverty and ruin, and next moment conjuring up horrors! I wish you were a little more thin-skinned yourself, and then you would know what you make me suffer with your old wives' tales.'

'Dear Julius, there is no need to excite yourself like this. I will not talk any more about little Olive. Let me take Ray up to bed; she is soundly asleep.'

But Julius' waywardness was not to be controlled.

'No, no! you shall not touch her;' and he knelt down by the couch, and kissed the thin little hand with passionate tenderness. 'Do you think I could bear her out of my sight, when you have put such an idea in my head! Of course Alick has been talking to you—he is a bird of ill omen, and croaks terribly. I think more of Dr. Brown's opinion than his, and I shall ask him to have a look at the child to-morrow.'

Hester sighed wearily. In these moods Julius required the utmost tact and patience on her part. She was cold and tired, and her depression was very great. After all, was she not Ray's mother? and had not she herself nearly died in giving her birth? It was Alick who had saved her when her own doctor had given her up. Julius had been grateful enough to him then.

'She is no worse,' she returned gently, bending over the child. 'Indeed, I think she looks better than usual—she has a nice little colour. Of course she would be warmer and more comfortable in her cot, but if you wish me to leave her——'

And then Julius veered suddenly round.

'No, no! Put her to bed. You are quite right—she looks fat and rosy in this light. I think I will go round and have a pipe with O'Brien'—a young artist who had

lately settled in the neighbourhood. He had lately married, and his pretty young wife was Irish, too. They were a gay, light-hearted young couple, and their free-and-easy ways, their bare rooms and cosy suppers, their jokes and Bohemianism, just suited him 'down to the ground,' as he phrased it. 'It is a beastly night; but you have spoilt my evening for me,' he continued with a martyr-like air.

Hester offered no remonstrance. The O'Briens were not to her taste—she thought Ellen O'Brien was a little loud and unrefined; but as Julius could not bear a word against his friends, she kept her opinions to herself—she only sighed again as she carried Ray upstairs. She had longed for sympathy, and, for once, she needed cheering; but her appeal had only brought upon her a lonely evening.

'Do not be late, dear,' she said pleadingly.

But even this was not taken in good part.

'There is no need for you to sit up. I have my latch-key. Please take the child out of the draught.'

And she obeyed him meekly, but as she toiled up the stairs more than one tear fell on the child's face.

'He is so blind, he will not see,' she thought. 'I know what Alick thinks—he is always right—our darling will not be with us much longer.'

'Mammie, my face is wet,' complained Ray in drowsy remonstrance. 'Where is dad? I have not said my prayers to him.'

'You shall say them to me instead, my sweet. Dad has gone out; but he kissed you when you were asleep and said good-night.'

'Dad always hears me say my prayers,' returned Ray obstinately. 'I shall not say them at all, mammie.'

'Then my little girl will be very naughty,' returned her mother calmly; she would not contend with her suffering child.

Ray had awakened from her nap shivering and miserable, and her 'bad leg,' as she called it, was giving her pain.

'I want to be naughty!' she exclaimed defiantly. 'Dad is naughty, too. I had my new hymn to-night, but I won't say a word of it.'

'That is very sad,' returned Hester, in her quiet tones. 'I shall have to say it all by myself;' and she actually

went through the whole childish petition, while Ray listened frowningly, and the kitten licked its sides and looked at them both.

Ray was still contumacious when Hester placed her in her cot and wished her good-night; and Hester was obliged to leave her and go downstairs and give the boys their tea. They were in a wild, rackety mood, and she had some trouble in inducing them to do their lessons; and it was rather a relief when they went up to bed.

Ray was very fond of her brothers, and Harry was her special favourite; and as they raced past her door, they heard her weak, querulous tones calling to them.

'Are you awake, Bo-peep?'—Harry's pet name for her.

'I never go to sleep when dad is out,' returned Ray fretfully. 'Dad is a naughty man to-night.'

'Hold on, Bo-peep; draw it mild!' and Harry squatted down on the rug before the fire, and made a facetious face at her.

Ray gave a feeble little laugh; the kitten was fast asleep, and she had found it dull lying in the big room staring at the fire. Her conscience was upbraiding her: if she had only said her prayers, perhaps she could have gone to sleep, too. She looked at Harry wistfully.

'Shall I tell you a secret, Harry?'

'A hundred if you like, Bo-peep. What a jolly fire! I wish I were a girl and could sleep in mother's room, too; it is precious cold in the garret, I can tell you. There was ice in our jug last night.'

'How funny!' replied Ray languidly. 'Harry, have you said your prayers?'

'Why, of course not, you duffer!—I mean Bo-peep. I generally wait until I get to my room.'

'I would not say mine to mammie,' sighed Ray. 'I just loved to be naughty. I wanted mammie to be angry—but she only looked sorry.'

'I call that real bad of you, Bo-peep,' remarked Harry, with boyish severity. 'You aren't a nice little girl, are you? Mother feels so unhappy to-night because little Olive is dead. She has just been telling us so.'

'Is little Olive an angel now?' asked Ray, in an awestruck

voice, and she sat up in her crib and looked at him with startled eyes.

'Well, of course she is an angel, you know. I guess Olive said her prayers,' he continued cunningly.

'I want to be an angel, too, very bad,' returned Ray, half crying. 'Dad says angels never have bad legs. I guess I will say mine, too, Harry.'

'Shall I fetch mother?' he asked, with happy intuition; and Ray nodded eagerly.

'Now go to sleep, my precious, and we will talk about little Olive to-morrow,' whispered Hester when the child had sobbed out her little confession. She had been naughty, and God would not make naughty children into angels. Harry had said so—at least, as Harry growled a remonstrance at this mis-statement, she thought he meant it. 'Shall mother stop with you a little?'

And, as Ray gave a sigh of assent, she took her seat by the cot, and for once the busy hands were idle.

In after-years the remembrance of that hour was very sweet to her. It was rarely that she got her child to herself. When Ray had fallen into a refreshing sleep, she still sat there. How quiet the house was! Her boys were dreaming blissfully upon their pillows; she could hear Phil snoring; Julius was happy with his friends: perhaps Ellen O'Brien was setting the little supper-table, while the two men smoked their pipes and watched her.

Hester's love for her husband was free from jealousy, and, to do him justice, he never gave her occasion to distrust him. Julius' volatile temperament led him into error, but he was perfectly loyal to his wife; and any idea of flirting with a pretty woman never entered his head. Self-indulgence and indolence, and a certain recklessness in money matters, were his chief sins. In practical things he failed utterly, and his irresponsibility was turning his wife's hair gray; but, with all his faults, his heart was in its right place.

Hester's thoughts were very busy as she sat there; she was travelling in imagination over the thirteen years of her married life. What a dull, sad wedding it had been! Her brother's silent protest, as he drew back, and allowed an old friend to take his place, had chilled her in her bridal happiness. But how good Julius had been to her!

'I will be brother as well as husband,' he had said to her; but, after all, Alick had not forsaken her.

She thought over her own words to Gerda: 'If the choice were to be given me again, I should do the same thing' Well, was that not the truth—absolute Gospel truth? Was it not the very meaning and essence of life, to toil and struggle and suffer, and do good work? Would she exchange these heights and depths, these alternating spells of storm and calm, of rain and sunshine, for any dead-level of monotonous well-being? It is only a small narrow nature that fears everything, that sees lions in the way on every rough path. 'Life, not mere existence,' had been Hester's cry, even in her girlhood; and with all her faults it was Pamela's cry, too.

'Ah, Julius, is that you?' she exclaimed incredulously, as she heard his footsteps at a much earlier hour than usual.

'Did you think it was a burglar?' asked Julius good-humouredly, as he entered the room; but they both spake in hushed voices, because of the child. 'Have you been sitting up here?' in a tone of surprise.

'Ray was rather restless, and could not get to sleep. Have you had a pleasant evening?'

'Oh, pretty well. The O'Briens were as pleased to see me as usual, and the little woman gave us a rattling good feed—steaks and oysters. What do you think of that, Hester? But somehow I had a hankering to be at home. Is Beauty-bright pretty fit to-night?'

'Yes, dear; she is much as usual.'

'All right, then I'll turn in, for I am dog tired. You are not going to do any writing to-night, Hester?'

'Oh no, certainly not;' but Julius still kept his ground, and looked at her critically.

'What do you think the fair Ellen said to-night? That I ought to look after you more; that you were looking thin and old—old! Did you ever hear such cheek, Hester?'

'We do not grow younger, Julius.'

'But, all the same, I won't have such speeches made to me! Now I look at you, you certainly are thinner. Now, just mind this, I won't have you getting up at cock-crow to-morrow; I think you have got a craze about work.'

'Very well, dear; but, after all, Mrs. O'Brien is nc authority.'

'She is a sensible, good-hearted little creature, and she makes Pat a capital wife. Ah! I know what you are going to say—that she is not your sort; she is not tidy enough, and she laughs too much. But she would put you up to a wrinkle or two, old lady;' and Julius nodded in a knowing way, as he went off to his dressing-room.

'I wonder if I am growing old,' thought Hester, as she took up her well-worn Thomas à Kempis, 'and if Julius noticed that my hair is turning gray? I think he grows younger, somehow; he seems to have the secret of perpetual youth. After all, it is not how old we are, but how old we feel,' thought Hester, as she opened her book.

CHAPTER XXIII

PAMELA'S DINNER-PARTY

'A stander-by may sometimes see more of the game than he who plays it.'—DEAN SWIFT.

SUNDAY was scarcely a day of rest at St. Jude's Vicarage; the frequent services and the schools hardly afforded a moment's leisure to the hard-worked Vicar. His only assistant was a young deacon, fresh from Oxford, with weak eyes and the zeal of an Apostle. It was understood that he had a leaning towards ritualism, and that he was not altogether in touch with his Vicar; and Clare had more than once expressed her surprise at her husband's forbearance.

'I often wonder at your patience, Horace,' she said, one Sunday night after supper, when Mr. Hathaway had been bristling all over with aggressive suggestions, which the Vicar had received with good-humoured toleration.

The Rev. Simon Hathaway was a small, pale young man, and, with his closely-shorn fair hair and gleaming glasses, he had rather a limp, meek appearance; but unfortunately his looks belied him. He was by no means meek. With this lamb-like exterior he had the roar of the lion, and at times his roar was terrible.

When Clare made her little speech, Mr. Glyn only shrugged his shoulders.

'He is a capital worker, and he is thoroughly in earnest; but, of course, he is young.'

'But, all the same, he made himself very objectionable

this evening. You would not allow Walter to speak to you as Mr. Hathaway did. I think you ought to rebuke him, Horace.'

'My dear, if he had looked at your face, he would have felt himself sufficiently rebuked; even Bessie was too much shocked to raise her eyes. I can assure you that his eloquence made no sort of impression on me.'

'Bessie cannot bear him.'

'That is very ungrateful of Bessie, as he seems to admire her so much. By-the-bye, when I engaged him as my curate, I never intended him to become my son-in-law!'

'Oh, Horace, what a horrible idea!'

'Aren't you a little inconsistent, my love? Simon—good heavens! what a name!—comes of a good stock. Are you aware that his father is Sir Richard Hathaway? and that he will be a rich as well as an aristocratic Simon one day? Think if his elder brother were to die—he has weak eyes, too; they are in the family—and Bessie were to be Lady Hathaway!'

But Clare had listened to this speech with a scornful curl of her lip; she quite understood that her husband was amusing himself at her expense, and she wisely held her peace.

Mr. Hathaway was seldom allowed to occupy his Vicar's pulpit, but the afternoon's catechizing was allotted to him, and on these occasions he would comport himself with a severity that struck terror into the hearts of the children.

Bessie used to carry home odd tales to her mother.

'I never knew anyone with such a powerful voice,' she said once. 'You can hear him all over the church quite distinctly, however low he speaks. Do you know what little Abel Gubbins said this afternoon? Mr. Hathaway asked him such a ridiculous question—"Who were the sons of Belial?" And Abel got quite red, and stammered, "Please, sir, you and all the gentlemen who wear crosses on their ribbons." Whatever could he mean by that? Mr. Hathaway looked so angry; he had his new stole on. He sent Abel out of the church; but all the children were tittering.'

Horace Glyn gave one of his rare laughs when he heard that anecdote. When he met Abel in the district next day, he patted his head not unkindly.

'You are a smart lad, but you have plenty to learn yet "It is better to slip with the foot than with the tongue," as the old proverb says, my little man.'

And Abel blushed and hung down his head.

'He do ask such plaguey questions,' he muttered rebelliously. 'I'll be mum next toime, and maybe I won't be kicked out of the church.'

'No, no; you will only think before you speak, my lad; and there is a penny for you to buy marbles.'

'He is a real noice gentleman,' Abel confided to his mother that afternoon. 'He ain't like that little yellow-haired chap with specs. He give me a penny, did the Vicar. And "you are a smart lad"—that is what he said.'

'Get out, and don't go whittling wood over my wet floor!' returned Mrs. Gubbins unsympathetically; but she had seven boys, and her husband was a little too frequent in his visits to the Red Lion, so perhaps there was some excuse for her.

The mothers in Hazelbeech Gardens were mostly blessed with shrill voices, and somewhat short in their tempers.

'I can feel for them,' Clare said once; 'it must be such a relief under aggravating circumstances to bring a hard substance in contact with the wall. To be sure, little Tim Rogers hardly seemed to see the force of the argument; but I think'—reflectively—'that one should practise on one's own head first.'

Gerda went to St. Jude's morning and evening. Bessie had told her that the Lyalls generally sat in the seat before them, and she wondered whether Dr. Lyall would be there. In the morning Pamela was alone, but in the evening a gentleman accompanied her, whom Gerda rightly guessed to be Mr. Derrick Vincent.

She could not help glancing at him from time to time, partly because she was curious to see Pamela's *fiancé* and partly because his restlessness attracted her.

He was a very big man, and somewhat high-shouldered, and his length of limb made the restraint of the narrow pew evidently irksome to him, especially during the sermon. Pamela frowned visibly when he had changed his position for the eighth time, and gave him a warning glance; but

Mr. Vincent only uncrossed his legs and settled himself afresh.

When he stood up he seemed more at his ease, and, as he held up his hymn-book to let the light fall on the page, Gerda could see his face clearly. He had large features and was certainly very plain, and his short-sight obliged him to wear eye-glasses. He looked considerably over thirty, and his big clumsy figure was a marked contrast to the tiny dark woman beside him.

'An ill-matched pair,' thought Gerda as she prepared to follow Walter out of the church.

The crowd hindered her progress, and in the porch Pamela passed her with one of her quick, vivid smiles. Derrick Vincent gave Gerda an inquiring glance as he noticed the greeting. His eye-glasses were dangling; he looked bigger than ever in his heavy Inverness cape.

'What a time you are keeping me, Bear!' whispered Pamela, as he joined her in the starlight.

'I could not hurry. I was afraid of treading on people's toes,' he returned in a loud, good-humoured voice. 'Who is your friend, Pam—the girl in fur with the pale, creamy complexion? She sang rather nicely, I remember.'

'How dare you notice any young lady's complexion when you are walking with me!' pouted Pamela; 'and in church, too. I am shocked at your irreverence, sir.'

'Oh, come now!' he returned easily. 'if you mention irreverence, who was it who frowned like a miniature fury just because my long legs got cramped? You should not hit a fellow when he is down, Pam. I felt like a boa constrictor in a squirrel's cage; for the life of me I could not sit still.'

And then he tucked her little hand under his arm and went on talking in his leisurely, kindly fashion of this thing and that until Pamela forgot her lecture, and fell into the trap, and began to sparkle and smile, and to answer him playfully. And so they reached home in the best of tempers. There were times, as Pamela once told Hester, when she felt as though Derrick mesmerized her. 'He is so big and so placid, and there is so much of him altogether, mentally and physically, that I feel like a little dried-up goose beside him,' she remarked. But, unfortunately, these

fits of humility were rare. Pamela was by no means inclined to undervalue herself.

Gerda was looking forward to her evening at Roadside, but she feared that Mrs. Glyn did not share her pleasure. A cloud lay upon her bright spirits, and when Gerda went in search of her at the appointed hour, she was struck with her wan, weary looks.

'Oh, Aunt Clare, how tired you are! Of course, the mothers' meeting, and the library afterwards, have been too much for you.'

'In that case a good dinner ought to do me good,' returned Mrs. Glyn, trying to rouse herself. 'I wonder if Pamela will give us enough to eat.' And, as Gerda seemed rather astonished at this, she went on: 'Well, you see, you never know what mood she may be in. I always call the Roadside dinners "surprise parties." Last time your uncle Horace and Bessie and I dined there the fish had been forgotten, and there was no soup; but we feasted gaily on boiled beef and a turnover.'

'No wonder Uncle Horace does not care to go!'

'Oh, as to that, he would as soon dine off boiled beef as partake of half-a-dozen courses. It is not the *menu* that troubles him; but he hates to see Dr. Lyall annoyed. Upon my word, I have longed more than once to box Pamela's pretty little ears! I have felt a thirst for vengeance—like Mrs. Rogers, when she knocks Tim's head against the wall, only I would not do it so hard.'

'I wish Pamela could hear that.'

'Depend upon it, she will hear it some day. Come, Gerda, we must be going. What a lovely dress that is!—far too good for the occasion, you extravagant child! No wonder you insisted on a fly this wet night. I am afraid my old black silk does not do you credit.'

'Oh, black silk always looks nice, and so do you,' returned Gerda, colouring under her aunt's admiring survey. The cream-coloured surah was a little smart, but, then, Doris had once told her that no dress suited her so well. 'You do really look like a Princess in it,' she had remarked, alluding to Sir Godfrey's pet name.

Gerda was indulging her girlish vanity at the expense of her common sense. Her old blue velveteen would have been

more suitable. Dr. Lyall seemed dazzled for a moment, when he joined them in the drawing-room. That fair white figure that had lighted on his hearth almost took away his breath. 'A poor doctor must not think of impossibilities,' he muttered, as he crossed the room to shake hands with his guests.

Gerda was not prepossessed by the appearance of the narrow entrance-hall, neither was the winding staircase and upper lobby to her taste. Pamela had evidently no domestic capabilities; those little graceful finishes that bespeak cultured taste were totally wanting at Roadside. The drawing-room was large, but somewhat bare-looking; two or three easy-chairs had been dragged to the edge of the hearth-rug, leaving an empty space; books and work and papers were thrown on the big, roomy couch. 'It could all be made so much better,' thought Gerda, with the irritated feeling of seeing good material wasted. Her fingers longed to unloop and readjust the stiff draperies that hung over the window; she would have pushed the big couch into that snug corner by the fire, and the cabinet of old china should have been moved to the other end of the room. Gerda amused herself that night settling a thousand fanciful details; she put herself in Pamela's place. With a few pounds, a very few indeed, the room should look lovely. One of those Oriental nondescript stuffs should be fashioned into a portière; a dozen or two yards of cretonne, a little Madras muslin, a big jar, and a palm would do wonders. 'It was not a bad room, although, of course, it was old-fashioned; but the furniture was quite nice;' and she fell asleep in the midst of her calculations.

The drawing-room was only illumined by firelight when they entered, and a gentleman was fast asleep in one of the big easy-chairs. He started up and rubbed his eyes in an ashamed manner, when he saw the ladies.

'I am so sorry we disturbed you, Mr. Vincent,' observed Mrs. Glyn, laughing at his very visible embarrassment. 'You need not look so guilty; a twilight nap is most excusable.'

'I was reading a minute ago,' he returned apologetically. 'I remember the very passage; it was Thackeray's finest, when honest Tom Newcome utters his last "Adsum."

Nothing in fiction was ever more touching. Little Nell's death—pooh! it cannot hold a candle to it.'

'And yet it sent you to sleep!' in a teasing voice.

'I was only shutting my eyes to blink the tears out of them,' he returned. 'I always feel such an ass when I read that. Don't betray me to Pamela, Mrs. Glyn; she has the whip-hand over me in many ways;' and his look and manner were so droll that Gerda could not help laughing.

Mr. Vincent was leaning againt the mantelpiece, and as he heard that clear, silvery laugh, he put on his eye-glasses and looked at her benignantly. He had a pleasant voice and smile, which somewhat redeemed his plainness; and his light, prominent gray eyes were mild and intelligent.

'I have not introduced you to my niece, Mr. Vincent.'

Then he bowed a little awkwardly, and allowed his eye-glasses to dangle again.

'Pamela is in the lower regions,' he remarked; 'she has the cares of housekeeping on her mind. She gave me orders to be as entertaining as my nature permitted. Alick is out—he always is out—it is a peculiarity of doctors to prefer everyone's house to their own. I have frequently remarked to Alick that a caravan would be more suitable; but he does not seem to see it.'

'Mr. Vincent has very whimsical ideas, Gerda,' observed Mrs. Glyn cheerfully. 'He has amusing theories, but somehow his practice does not correspond with them. How are you getting on, Mr. Vincent? Have you found any pupils yet? You see, I take the liberty of an old friend.'

'I always notice,' returned Mr. Vincent slowly, as he took possession of a vacant seat, 'that when anyone has anything disagreeable to say, that formula is invariably used—"I take the liberty of an old friend." Excuse me if I shiver perceptibly; you are too crushing, Mrs. Glyn.'

'I am afraid I am sufficiently answered.'

Mr. Vincent regarded her with a mild, short-sighted expression.

'"Old wood to burn; old wine to drink; old friends to trust; old authors to read." My dear lady, Alphonso of Aragon was a wise man. I accept your offer of friendship, and I do not mind telling you that I have a pupil.'

'I am delighted to hear it!'

'Thanks, awfully! To be sure, he is a very small one, and he is hardly as lucrative as one could wish.'

'Still, he may bring others. You would not mind a small brief as a commencement. I am sure Pamela must be pleased.'

'Well, I would not allow her to be too sanguine; it would never do to think of going into housekeeping at present. The fact is, I am afraid I shall disappoint you, Mrs. Glyn. You are a good soul to take such interest in a poverty-stricken barrister; but the fellow is my shoeblack, and I am teaching him to read.'

'Oh dear, oh dear!' in a disgusted voice; and Mr. Vincent went on in the same drawling tone.

'"Undertake some labour, that the devil may find thee always occupied," says St. Jerome.' Then he crossed his legs, and fell into a reverie. 'I was struck with the remark; it seemed to tally so beautifully with the lesson I learnt in childhood, when we imbibed wisdom from the pages of the immortal poet Watts—Dr. Watts. Did you learn Watts's hymns, Miss Meredith?' And he continued melodiously:

> '"And Satan finds some mischief still
> For idle hands to do."

Beautiful sentiment; supreme reasoning. I sent for Bob Stukes at once; he was dirty, but it was honest grime. "Bob," I said, "when Diabolus appears, let me be found in innocent sobriety teaching the young idea to shoot——"'

'What nonsense are you talking now, Derrick?' exclaimed a voice from the doorway, and Pamela suddenly flashed into the firelight.

She was dressed oddly but effectively in a red silk dress with a prodigious train; and her hair was piled in a curious fashion on the top of her head, and fastened by coral pins. Mr. Vincent rose from his chair and put on his eye-glasses again.

'The room is a trifle warm,' he murmured. 'I always find one fire enough, even in winter.'

'If you are going to be rude, Derrick, I shall not speak to you again,' returned Pamela severely. 'May I sit by you, Mrs. Glyn? You never say horrid things. Derrick

wants his dinner; but it is not my fault if Alick keeps us waiting. Ah, there he is at last!' as Dr. Lyall made his appearance.

'Dinner is ready, Pam,' he observed, as he greeted his guests. 'May I take you down, Mrs. Glyn? I hope we shall find something to eat,' he remarked in an undertone. 'When Pamela puts on that red dress, I always scent mischief.'

The dining-room looked warm and comfortable, and a couple of lamps diffused a mellow glow; but Gerda, used to luxury, noticed at once the absence of all floral decorations.

'I must draw the line somewhere,' observed Pamela cheerfully, addressing Gerda. 'I never buy flowers. Alick adores them, and so do I; but I think it right to deny ourselves such an indulgence.'

'I am quite sure that you will not endorse my sister's opinion,' replied Dr. Lyall, with a quick look at Gerda's disconcerted face. What an unfortunate remark! and how was she to answer it? How often she had professed to Doris that she would rather go without her dinner than without flowers! 'It is one of Pam's unnecessary retrenchments; another time I will furnish the flowers myself.'

Dr. Lyall spoke somewhat pointedly, but he was bent on being agreeable to-night, so he decided to let this pass. The soup was excellent—so surprisingly good that he was half afraid that Rebecca did not make it—and the fish, an uncommonly fine piece of turbot, was cooked to a nicety.

'Capital, Pamela!' he could not refrain from saying.

But his sister only elevated her eyebrows, and went on with her conversation.

Mrs. Glyn was to venture the next remark:

'You should not have made company of us, my dear,' she said in an undertone, as a tempting-looking entrée was handed to her. But no one overheard this.

'There is curried rabbit, if you prefer it,' returned Pamela carelessly; 'but I recommend the pigeons.'

Mrs. Glyn said no more. She noticed that their host looked a little puzzled by the need of selection. But Gerda spoke to him at that moment, and he brightened again.

What did it matter what he ate or drank, when he had her beside him—when for the first time she was breaking bread in his own house? He could scarcely take his eyes off her to-night. Why had he ever failed to admire her? She looked so sweet and girlish in her virginal whiteness, with those tiny pearls round her soft throat. He noticed her hand as it rested on the table; it was thin and blue-veined, and a slight sapphire ring was on one finger. An insane longing came over him to take it in his own; if he could only tell her what she was to him—that he must always love her, whether she cared for him or not!

He scarcely heard what she was saying that moment. But when she laughed—for she was telling him about Abel Gubbins—he laughed, too, in an absent, meaningless way.

'What would Sir Godfrey say?' he was thinking at that moment. 'A poor medical man——' And then he gave himself a shake as though to rouse himself from this fool's dream, and commenced carving the saddle of mutton that was put before him.

'Mrs. Glyn would prefer turkey, Alick,' observed Pamela demurely, and then he was awake in earnest.

Turkey, saddle of mutton, and two entrées! Ah, he was up to the little witch now!

'Perhaps you have game to follow, my dear?' he remarked ironically.

Derrick was putting up his eye-glasses again. He seemed rapt in contemplation of the turkey.

'A noble bird!' he murmured. 'Let us be festive.'

'There is only a pheasant, Alick,' returned Pamela modestly.

But Dr. Lyall made no further observation. He sat calmly when the pheasant was removed and the table was covered with sweets. The luxurious dessert provoked no further comment.

Pamela glanced under her eyelashes at him at every course. She pressed her unwilling guests to partake of every dish; she was affable to her *fiancé;* she patronised Gerda.

'We cannot compete with you,' she observed, with mock humility. 'Those grapes are hot-house grapes, though they are not like Sir Godfrey's; but I hope you are not going

to refuse them. Alick,' disregarding a certain stoniness of visage which she well knew, 'will you tempt Miss Meredith with those candied fruits?'

'Some people's grapes are sour,' observed Mr. Vincent placidly, as he helped himself liberally. He had waxed more brilliant and cheerful at every course.

Mrs. Glyn was not in her usual spirits, and for once she was inclined to take her favourite to task. There were limits even to a joke, and this was an expensive joke; how would poor Dr. Lyall like his weekly bill? No, indeed, Pamela was going too far; she would forfeit her brother's respect; she would lower herself in her lover's eyes.

'Pamela, I think the ladies are ready to go upstairs, observed Dr. Lyall, and Mrs. Glyn rose with a look of relief.

CHAPTER XXIV

DERRICK HAS A WORD TO SAY

'Man tosses like a bull or crushes like a lion; woman gnaws like a mouse or squeezes like a serpent.'—*Thoughts of a Queen.*

Mrs. Glyn's face was unusually grave as she seated herself by the fire. If a lecture were in store for Pamela, she was evidently determined that it should not be delivered that evening. Naughty Pamela glanced at her, and then began chattering to Gerda in an easy, unconcerned manner. She wished Gerda to try her new piano. Yes, it was her own; she had actually purchased it with her very own money. She could exist without flowers, though she doted on them; but not without a piano. 'Oh,' as Gerda appeared rather surprised at this information, 'she had a little money—she was not quite a pauper. Did Gerda suppose'—tossing her head—'that Alick bought her dresses? No, indeed; in that case she would have to wear old gowns and mend her gloves, as Hester did. Alick thought two new gowns a year were sufficient for any girl.'

'Do you practise much?' asked Gerda, as she willingly took her place at the instrument. She had a pretty voice, and was never reluctant to sing if people asked her.

Pamela drew a plump finger across the keys before she answered.

'Practise!—no, indeed. What an idea! Why, I hardly ever play, unless I am just in the mood, and then I never leave off. I am rather like the Piper of Hamelin in that. One night, when Alick was cross because he had a cold and

wanted to go to sleep, he turned off the gas because I would not shut up the piano. But I told him I loved playing in the dark. He had a benefit that night! I was not going to be trampled on; but I punished myself as well as Alick. I got a cold, and I was so sick of my own playing that I did not touch the piano for a fortnight. Now sing something, and don't stop until I tell you.'

Gerda obeyed, and in two or three minutes Derrick Vincent's slow, heavy footfall was heard on the stairs, closely followed by Dr. Lyall's quick, springy step. Mr. Vincent stood on the threshold for a moment reconnoitring the scene; then he sauntered towards the fireplace and sank into an easy-chair beside Mrs. Glyn.

Pamela took no notice of either of them. She was clearing the books and papers, and putting little orderly touches to the furniture. She was generally seized with a fit of tidiness at the wrong time. She had even been known to water her plants at three o'clock in the morning. 'I hate doing things just like everybody else,' she would say, and Alick would assure her in cynical fashion that she was a perfectly unique specimen.

Derrick watched her, as he lay back in his chair listening to the music. Not a movement escaped him. The swish, swish of the red silk gown seemed to blend with the song. What was Miss Meredith singing? 'Strangers yet'—that old, old thing! What a choice! But women always liked sentiment. Pamela did. She was chock full of sentiment and nonsense. She was like an ill-cultivated garden full of flowers all run to seed; she wanted pruning and culture and skilful weeding, and a strong hand to guide her, and plenty of love and sunshine. Alick was too severe, too practical. He ought to laugh at her. He did not understand her in the least. Why, he could put him up to a wrinkle or two. He knew Pamela as no one else did—all her sweetness and her naughtiness. 'Strangers yet!' Indeed, nothing of the kind. He had studied her thoroughly, and he knew that when he chose to exercise his will, and put forth his strength, he was her master—the only man in the world that Pamela would ever promise to love, honour, and obey. She had been very naughty this evening. He did not intend to condone her fault in the least. She knew what he thought

of her conduct—the little bright-eyed, wilful thing! That was what her fit of tidiness meant. She was afraid to look at him or to meet his eyes; that was why she had pranked herself out in brilliant colours. She was thoroughly enjoying herself, and deferring the moment of repentance to some indefinite future.

Swish went the red gown again, past his chair. When he had a right to issue his marital orders, he should taboo silk gowns, and all kinds of hard crinkly fabrics. He liked gowns that made no sound, that never rustled or betrayed their wearer. She was behind him now; that horrid jingling bracelet she wore had caught in his chair-back. Jingling bracelets and chair-backs, especially chair-backs, should be sent to limbo—confiscated, put under lock and key. Another time he would have jumped up and gone to her assistance. He would have complicated matters with real or assumed awkwardness. Derrick was not a lady's man. But now Pamela was left to extricate herself, while he closed his eyes and hummed a soft accompaniment to the song.

Dr. Lyall had taken possession of a chair a little behind Gerda, and had forgotten his vexation as he listened to those bird-like notes. He was passionately fond of music, but Pamela's playing did not please him; it was too loud, too discursive, too uneven in its rapidity. Gerda's voice was by no means perfect, but it never failed to soothe and please. There was a freshness, a pathos, a purity of intonation that always thrilled him.

'Do not stop,' he whispered when she had finished her first song; 'if you will only sing until you are tired!' and she had smiled assent.

Once, when he turned her page, she had looked up at him, and their eyes had met. Gerda's clear notes faltered for an instant. That moved expression on his face—that tender, half-melancholy look—what could it mean? Then a sort of inspiration seized her. He was troubled; something, perhaps Pamela's extravagance, vexed him. Could she not try to comfort him, to make him forget his worries? He should only remember that she was singing to him. A new sense of power came over her—a delicious consciousness that there was some silent understanding between them, that the outward world was shut out from them, that he

had drawn more closely to her, and that if she turned she could see his dark head against the lamplight, as he sat there wrapped in some deep musing.

Pamela was still flitting about the room, and Derrick's big, lazy figure was still buried in the easy-chair; only Mrs. Glyn now and then glanced at her niece, as though something puzzled her. Why was Gerda singing like that? She seemed almost inspired to-night. No wonder Dr. Lyall was wrapped up in the music—he was so still that he might almost have fallen asleep. If she had only guessed the meaning of it—the soft brilliancy in Gerda's eyes, the suppressed emotion in Dr. Lyall's face when he at last roused himself!

'How selfish I am! Of course you must be tired. No,' very decidedly laying a firm hand on the music-book, 'you shall not sing another note to-night. Do you know what pleasure you have given me? This is what I love—one song after another, no fuss, no pressing, no getting up and down from the music-stool. Indeed, I cannot thank you properly. I—I——' getting strangely embarrassed.

'It was a pleasure to me, too,' returned Gerda softly. 'It is such a little thing to do for one's friends.'

'It is not a little thing to me'—in a tone that was new to her ear. 'If I come to the Vicarage, will you sing to me again—just the same songs over again? You know,' rather hurriedly, 'I often come to the Vicarage.'

'Do you? I am so glad! Oh yes, I will sing as much as you like, Dr. Lyall; and Bessie has a pretty voice, too.'

'I do not want to hear Bessie. I want to hear you—only you!' And then he drew a deep breath, and jumped up from his chair.

Pshaw! why had he said that? Good heavens! what did he mean by making such a speech? He must pull himself together; he must keep a tighter rein over himself. And then he walked up to the fire, and began talking a little incoherently to Mrs. Glyn, while Gerda collected her music with trembling fingers.

'I do not want to hear Bessie, but only to hear you—only you!' He had actually said those words. He had said them in a vehement undertone; but they had been

distinctly audible. 'Only you — only you!' seemed to reverberate in her ears.

That was the crowning moment of the evening; after that nothing else happened. Dr. Lyall was called away to a patient. He passed quite close to her as he went off hurriedly, with no thought but for his patient.

Then the cab had arrived, and Mrs. Glyn had risen at once from her seat.

'We must go now, Pamela. You must wish your brother good-night.—Come, Gerda, we will not keep the cab waiting;' and Gerda had been swept off without a moment's delay.

Mr. Vincent had escorted them downstairs, and had watched them safely off the premises.

Dr. Lyall came out of his study the next moment.

'Are they gone?' he asked quickly. 'I thought I heard wheels. I am called out, Derrick. Are you going to Daintree House now? Shall we walk together? I am going as far as Burlington Road.'

'I think I will follow you; you walk too fast for me,' returned Derrick quietly. 'Good-night, old man. Put up the collar of your coat; it is a sharpish night;' and he went back to the drawing-room.

Pamela had turned out the lamp and closed the piano. She received him ungraciously.

'I thought you had gone,' she said shortly. 'If you want to smoke, there is Alick's study.'

'Oh!' remarked Derrick tranquilly, as he took up the poker and made a mighty blaze. 'You thought I was too offended, too much upset altogether, even to bid you good-night. What a naughty little child you have been to-night, Pam! Let us have it all out'; and here he took possession of her reluctant hands and held her before him. 'You have got to appease me as well as Alick. Now, to begin'—in a delightfully persuasive voice—'what made you invent that *menu*?'

'I thought Alick was fussy about Miss Meredith, and wanted a good dinner,' Pamela spoke rebelliously. She would have moved away, but Derrick's strong white hands were pinioning her. She might have been a little bird fluttering in his grasp, and yet his touch was perfectly

gentle, and nothing could exceed the affability of his tone. Why, then, did Pamela's cheek begin to burn. 'Let me go, Derrick! You are a rude bear to keep me a prisoner. I think we have had a delightful evening.'

'Oh, of course, a delightful evening!' echoed Derrick. 'By-the-bye, did Rebecca cook the dinner?'

'Rebecca!'—contemptuously. 'Do you suppose she could have managed all those courses? It was Mrs. Playfair. Everyone who gives dinner-parties in Cromehurst has Mrs. Playfair. She is a little ambitious. Her *menu* was too extensive even for me. She proposed ice-pudding—fancy ice-pudding in this weather! I said, "No, we will strike that out."'

'Don't you think you were wrong there, Pam? "Why spoil the ship for a ha'p'orth of tar?"—excuse the homeliness of the proverb. Ice-pudding would have struck terror into Alick's heart; it would at once have brought him to his senses; he would have felt the justice of his punishment. Come, now, I think you failed to score one there.'

Derrick spoke in a small, wheedling voice, as though he were appeasing an infant.

'Don't speak to me in that tone, Derrick; I will not bear it;' and Pamela stamped her foot. 'Do you think I don't understand you? You want to make me feel ashamed of myself; you want to prove to me in a roundabout way that I have taken a mean revenge on Alick—that I had no right to tease and worry him.'

'Now, what have I said to put her out like this?' observed Derrick, apostrophizing the empty room. 'Now I come to look at you, Pam, you are quite hot and angry. Calm yourself, my child. Why, there is actually an absurd little tear on one eyelash! Ye gods of Parnassus! actually a tear!'

'You shall not enrage me,' returned Pamela, in a choked voice. 'You want to make me hate you as well as Alick; you want me to put myself in a passion, and then you will have a right to lecture me. Oh, I know your ways! You never say anything out—at first. But I will not be managed or coerced. Alick wanted a lesson, and I gave him one; and if you think I am sorry——' with a pout of defiance.

'I think Alick will be a little sorry when the bill comes

in—turkey, and game, and hot-house fruit, and Mrs. Playfair. Upon my word, I don't envy Alick's feelings!'

'There again!' in an indignant tone; 'you can say that, and yet you pretend to understand me. Have I ever wronged Alick of a farthing? If I am giving him a lesson, shall I not pay for it myself—for the turkey, and the game, and Mrs. Playfair? It was a joke, a game, a little bit of spite and revenge—it was each and everything.' But with a little sob of anger, not contrition: 'I shall have to go without a new dress in the spring to pay for it!'

Then Derrick dropped his hands, and an odd indefinable look crossed his face.

'Come and sit down, and let us talk about it comfortably,' he said kindly. 'I have a lot to say to you, and it is getting late. Now then for the old formula. Just look at me, and say, "I am awfully sorry, Bear, for having made such an absurd little goose of myself," and I will forgive you, and so shall Alick.'

'Really and truly, Derrick?'

'Really and truly, sweetheart, and amen, and so be it!'

'Well, then, I am sorry for having spoiled Alick's evening; but if you only knew how aggravating and nagging he has been all the week!'

'Alick is the best fellow in the world, and he is going to be my brother-in-law, and I will not say a word against him. If you wanted to give him a lesson, you foolish child—to heap coals of fire on his head—why did you not think of a better way—a new carpet for his study, or an armchair, or something comfortable—instead of spending your few pennies on Mrs. Playfair and hot-house fruit?'

'It would have been wiser, but I thought the dinner would be such fun;' and here Pamela began to laugh. 'Did you see Alick's face when I mentioned the pheasant? It was so deliciously stony. Oh dear!'—as a certain expression in Derrick's eyes warned her that this was dangerous ground—'I am getting naughty again;' and then she sidled up close to him. 'Don't say any more about it, Bear dear, and I will promise to be as good as possible to Alick.'

'All right, then I will start another topic. Pam, do you know I really have a pupil in view? It is not settled, but if I land him he will be a big fish.'

'Oh, Derrick, how delightful!'

'I shall know all about it by the day after to-morrow. Look here, little one, shall I run down in the evening and tell you all about it? And then I can have another cut at the turkey. No fear of cold mutton and pickles—eh, Pam?'

'Don't, Bear! Do you know, I cried myself to sleep that night. It seemed so cruel to you, my poor dear!'

'It was a bone of contention, certainly; but there is something else to tell you. I got ten guineas for that magazine article, and Mr. Black wants some more in the same style.'

'Oh, what good news!' and Pamela's eyes began to sparkle happily. 'You are not in debt now, Derrick?'

'I do not owe a penny. Look here, lassie, those ten guineas shall be laid up as a nest-egg. I will not touch them. The capital is small, but still it is capital. Don't lose heart. I will have a nest for my bird some day'; and Derrick finished his sentence in a way that was perfectly satisfactory to himself.

At this moment the latch-key was heard in the street-door below, and Pamela started up.

'That is Alick. Must I say good-night to him, Derrick? I—I—would rather not,' looking at him, as though pleading to be let off some troublesome duty. But Derrick took no notice; he went out in the passage, and leant over the banisters.

'I say, old man!'

'Hulloa! haven't you gone yet?' exclaimed Alick in surprise, as he took off his wet coat. 'It is a horrid night—sleet and rain and everything abominable. Well, as you are here, you had better come down and have a pipe. Tell Pamela to go to bed.'

Derrick shook his head sadly; then he observed dolorously:

> 'Oh, call my brother back to me!
> I cannot play alone.
> The summer comes with flower and bee—
> Where is my brother gone?'

'Oh, shut up! and come down,' returned Dr. Lyall, in a disgusted tone. 'No one wants Mrs. Hemans at this time of night.'

'He is as sweet as honey and dew combined!' exclaimed Derrick, in an encouraging voice. 'He is in a melting mood —boots and all. Now is your time, Pam: dry slippers, and the cup that cheers but not inebriates. Ah!'—as the red dress flashed past him—'see the conquering heroine goes!' and he retired discreetly.

A quarter of an hour later he entered the study. Alick was in an easy-chair by the fire, and Pamela was in a heap on the hearthrug at his feet, and both brother and sister seemed in high good humour.

'I have told Alick about the pupil,' she said brightly, 'and you are to come down as you proposed, and Jessie Brown is to be asked too;' and, as Derrick tried to look pleased at this, she continued coaxingly: 'You will not mind, will you, Derrick, because Alick wishes it so much? He says I never pay Jessie the least attention, and she always goes early.'

'To be sure. Ask Jessie—I beg her pardon, Miss Brown —by all means. There will be the remains of Alexander's feast. No, thanks, Alick, my boy,' as Dr. Lyall pointed to a chair; 'it is too late to smoke now. I must not keep Hester up;' and Pamela jumped up to see him out.

Dr. Lyall sat a long time by his fire that night; it was evident that some important decision was weighing in the balance. He had his account-books before him; some abstruse calculation seemed to trouble him; then his brow cleared, and he threw himself back in his chair.

'It is not so bad, after all,' he muttered, 'and things will improve. One would have to be careful, and work hard for some years; but my father began on less.' Then he paused, and his eyes glistened as he thought of his mother. She had always been a hallowed memory to him; her fair face and calm, gentle ways would never be forgotten by her children. Something in Gerda's voice and expression had reminded him of his mother.

'Why should I not feel my way with her?' he said to himself. 'There is no fear that I shall be interfering with another man's rights. If she could bring herself to face a little roughness and uphill work for my sake, no one would have a right to forbid her; but I must make her clearly understand how I am situated. Hester and her boys must

not suffer. I think I am oddly constituted,' he continued; 'I could enjoy no happiness if it were obtained at another person's expense. Then there is Pamela; she is another difficulty. I do not believe Derrick will be in a position to marry for years. Well, well! if I make up my mind that it is right to do it—but how is a man in my position to argue the matter coolly? I will put it all before her very plainly. I will take no answer on the spur of the moment; she shall not sacrifice herself without due consideration. Then there is Sir Godfrey and her mother; but I believe she is of age. Oh, well, I will go and sleep on it:' and he turned out his gas and went upstairs.

After all, it was Gerda who did not sleep that night, who lay in the darkness with throbbing pulses, in a tangle of sweet, confusing thoughts.

Had he meant it? Was he a man to say anything that was not absolutely true? 'Only you—only you!' The words seemed ticking in her brain; they followed her in her dreams. 'Only you—only you!'

CHAPTER XXV

UNDER-CURRENTS

'That strange fantastic nervous organism which is the outward expression of life.'—Lord Houghton.

Gerda was left to her own thoughts the next day. Mr. Glyn and Walter had gone up to town for that consultation with Mr. Harding, and Mrs. Glyn had been unable to settle to any quiet indoor occupation.

'I think I shall have a long morning in my district,' she had announced at breakfast-time. 'I did very little there yesterday.'

And though her husband spoke disparagingly of the weather, and warned her to wrap up warmly, he had not the heart to check her. 'She will be less restless out of doors,' he thought, as he took up his letters and carried them off to his study.

Gerda was quite contented to be alone. She wrote to her mother and Doris, and then she settled to her fancy-work. As she sat there in the gray wintry light, she seemed to weave in all kinds of sweet, subtle fancies with the flowers she was embroidering. A dim, hazy veil seemed drawn across the future. What a grand, beautiful mystery life was, after all! Where were the aches, the pains, the troubles that people lamented so loudly? What did it matter that they must come some day? Why should she meet them half-way? She was young—and was not youth the loveliest possible thing, with its wide margins, and grand perspectives, and endless distances? By-and-by the path

would grow a little steep, the walking would be rougher. By-and-by!—oh, the sweet insouciance, the absolute faith of youth—'by-and-by!' To-day is ours: to-morrow—who cares about to-morrow? Only give us our 'portion of goods'—the sweet hopes, the desires, the dreams that are our own rightful heritage, the sunny, beautiful memories that are the true background of life—and we will ask no more!

Gerda was so absorbed with these happy musings that she was almost sorry when the door-bell rang and Pamela made her appearance: any argument or discord would jar the serenity that seemed to enwrap her.

But she need not have feared. Pamela was in an unusually subdued mood; she sat down quietly and pulled off her gloves.

'I thought I would come and see how you and Mrs. Glyn were this morning. Is Mrs. Glyn out?'—in rather a disappointed tone. 'I wanted to see her particularly.'

And then Gerda explained that her aunt was spending the morning in Elmtree Road and Hazelbeech Gardens. Pamela sighed.

'She is a good woman, this aunt of yours. I think you take after her a little;' and as Gerda looked up from her work with rather a surprised expression, she continued: 'I wish I could sing as you do. Alick looked so happy all the time you were singing, and Derrick said you reminded him of a nestful of thrushes. Derrick is not really fond of music, and he wanted me to invest my money instead of buying a piano; but I thought if we were always to be so dreadfully poor I must take care to provide myself with all necessary luxuries.'

'Do you mean that Mr. Vincent is poor?'

'Dear me, yes! he is as poor as a church mouse. You should just see his rooms—such mean little garrets! The roof is so low that when he stands up he can touch the ceiling with one hand; and the furniture is as shabby as possible I want to give him lots of things; but Derrick is rather peculiar: he will not take a single thing from me. He was quite hurt once when I insisted on sending him a nice reading-lamp. We had a regular quarrel about it—we do quarrel sometimes—and then he said he would keep it

this once, but I must promise never to give him anything more.'

This puzzled Gerda.

'I thought engaged people always gave each other presents,' she observed. Pamela was talking so quietly and sensibly, her manner was so free from its usual flightiness, that she ventured to continue the subject. Pamela was quite willing to enlighten her.

'Yes, of course it is the usual thing, and Derrick and I have exchanged rings. Don't you like that custom, Gerda? It is not quite English, but I dare say it will become so. But from the first, as soon as I had accepted him, he put a veto on presents.'

'How very odd!'

'It is certainly very disagreeable of him, but his argument was this. He explained that he was a poor man, and that he could not afford to buy me presents, as he could hardly keep himself; so it would be wrong and dishonest on his part; but as it is the man's prerogative to lavish gifts on his intended wife, he would not allow me to usurp this privilege. Of course it is a grievous mistake on Derrick's part. I should be far happier spending my money on him and Alick. Alick is almost as bad; he is as proud in his way as Derrick, so I buy dresses, and sometimes I get things for Hester.'

'I can understand how you feel about it.'

'Can you?' And Pamela brightened up visibly. 'Mrs. Glyn once told me that my two masters were too hard on me, but she is wrong. Derrick is never hard; he is always so beautifully gentle;' but her eyes filled with tears. 'It is so miserable to know that he wants things and I must not get them for him. He is so tiresome on this one point; he will tell me what books he wants, and how difficult it is for him to go without them, and yet if I were to breathe a wish that I might get them, he would stiffen up in a moment like Alick. I am tolerably bold,' she continued, half laughing and half serious. 'I can tease Alick and play him any amount of tricks, but I dare not try it on Derrick—I dare not;' and Pamela was evidently in earnest.

'And yet he looks so very good-natured. I should feel far more afraid of Dr. Lyall.'

'You say that because you have no idea of Derrick's real

character. He is good-nature itself; he is never angry or impatient like other men. Julius told me the other day that he never in his life saw him out of temper; but when he makes up his mind about anything he is as firm as a rock. Alick could not be firmer. If he thought it his duty to give me up to-morrow, he would do so, whatever it would cost us both.'

'But, Pamela dear, that sounds so terrible.'

'Yes,' and her face quivered a little. 'But if he gave me up I should never say a word. He was very near doing it once. We were talking about long engagements, and he said rather sadly that he feared that ours would be longer than Jacob's, that he could see no opening at present, and that he often blamed himself for allowing me to engage myself to him, and so on, all in a remorseful tone; and then he looked at me very sharply. "Yes, I have done wrong, and I would undo that wrong if I believed it would be for your happiness."'

'I hope Mr. Vincent does not often make those speeches?'

'No, only that once; he knows I cannot do without him. But I am often very restless and unsettled. It comes into my head sometimes that one day his conscience may be too much for him; but there! I am only talking nonsense, and you are encouraging me.' But from that moment Gerda understood Pamela better; under the restlessness and the flightiness there was a loving, womanly heart. In her way, Pamela had suffered a good deal, though she would have died rather than own it to Derrick. 'I do not know what has come over me to-day!' continued Pamela, trying to laugh, but with the tears still in her eyes. 'I am in what Derrick calls a melting mood. I am not often so babyish. No, my dear,' tapping herself playfully, 'Pamela Lyall is a many-sided creature, a sort of human octopus, with feelers in all directions—this is my soft side; I am throwing out a feeler in search of sympathy. Don't you know how a cat wants to be stroked just the right way? Well, I am in my pussy-cat mood.'

'Ah, now I recognise Pamela,' returned Gerda, smiling. 'I could not imagine who my sober-minded friend could be. But surely you are not going?'

'Oh yes; I must not sit and be stroked any longer. I

have promised my big lord and master to be as nicely behaved as possible to my other master. That means, in plain English, that I must not keep Alick waiting for his luncheon. Well, you have been very good to me. I told you that we should suit each other down to the ground. Yes, that is slang, but it is so expressive. Good-bye! Give my love to madam!' And she flew off—no other word could furnish a proper notion of the nimble, bird-like motion with which Pamela skimmed over the ground.

Mrs. Glyn received Pamela's message with no special show of interest. Her thoughts were otherwise engaged. Bessie looked at her mother wistfully, when Mrs. Glyn observed that she was going over to Coombe to see a poor old woman who had been taken ill rather suddenly.

'It is old Betty Wilkinson,' she remarked. 'She is spending a week with her married daughter, and now they fear that she will never come home again.'

'It is a long walk, Aunt Clare, and you have been out all the morning,' remonstrated Gerda.

But Mrs. Glyn seemed bent on going. She did not invite either Gerda or Bessie to accompany her.

'Mother is very down to-day,' observed Bessie, as the door closed on Mrs. Glyn. 'I am afraid she is fretting about Walter. Mother is so seldom out of spirits. What can we do, Gerda?' To which her cousin very sensibly replied that their best plan would be to take no notice and leave her alone.

'You and I will have a walk too, Bessie. Let us go round by Campion Hill. I am tired of work, and I believe I am restless too.' And, as Bessie willingly agreed to this, the two girls started off for their walk.

When Mrs. Glyn came back she looked so utterly fagged and spent that Gerda insisted on her taking possession of the easy-chair, while she and Bessie waited on her. She had had a trying time, she told them. Old Betty was very ill indeed—dying, in fact—and it was hard to hear how the poor old creature longed to die at home.

'It went to my heart to see her fretting,' she continued, 'so I went round by Roadside to ask Dr. Lyall if anything could be done. But he was out, so I saw Pamela, and she will give him the message. He has always been so good to

old Betty. She is a dear old body, and has worked hard all her life, and he has a great respect for her.'

Now, what was there in this speech to make the colour come into Gerda's face? She was quite used to hearing Dr. Lyall's praises by this time; there was nothing new in that. She stole a furtive glance at herself as she went back to the tea-table. Her gray dress was nice, and her hair looked smooth and glossy. Perhaps it was the wind that made her face burn. But surely that was the street-door opening. Could that be Uncle Horace's footstep? But no; it was Emma announcing Dr. Lyall. He glanced at the tea-table as he passed, but Gerda was too busy with the kettle to notice him. She scarcely looked up when he came back to shake hands with her.

'You called at my house just now, Mrs. Glyn,' he observed as he walked to the fire-place. 'Pamela told me all about old Betty. We must not let the dear old woman die out there, away from her Willie, as she calls him.'

'Is Willie that big strapping red-haired fellow who married the widow with four children?'

'Yes, that is Willie. I fancy he rather regrets his bargain by this time. She is a very loud-voiced widow, and I should fancy her temper would match Xantippe's. What a fool the fellow was, to be sure! He was a good-looking chap, too; he was engaged to our Rebecca once. Well, we are both soft on old Betty, Mrs. Glyn, and I will tell you what I will do. I will fetch her home myself. To-morrow will be a slack day with me, and it will do her no harm to be moved. I mean that she will die none the quicker.'

'Now, Dr. Lyall, I call that a real Christian act of kindness, and I am ever so much obliged to you. Give him a good cup of tea, Gerda, and two small lumps of sugar, for he deserves it.'

'Miss Meredith has made tea for me before,' he returned as he waited for his cup. 'Do you remember the last time,' he added softly, and Gerda gave him a responsive smile.

A sudden veil of shyness had fallen over her, and she could find nothing to say. Dr. Lyall was silent, too; he drank his tea and put down his cup, and went back to the safe topic of old Betty; and if his eyes stole now and then

to a certain corner, no one was the wiser—certainly not Gerda—and yet, strange to say, they were both supremely happy.

The long drive to Coombe was a small price to pay for this unexpected pleasure. Words! What are words when one is basking in the sunshine of a presence one dearly loves! Dr. Lyall was no longer cold and tired; the Vicarage drawing-room seemed to him a haven of rest. A gray gown, a fair head resting against the high-backed chair, satisfied a certain hungry longing that had troubled him all day. He could see the knitting-needles flash between her white fingers—she looked the very image of soft repose!

'Well, I must go!' he exclaimed at last, with an impatient sigh. 'I have three more patients to see before dinner.'

And then Gerda did find something to say:

'You must be very, very tired,' she observed as she gave him her hand.

'I am not tired now,' he returned quickly; but there was meaning in his tone, and then he took himself off.

What a short visit—hardly a quarter of an hour! and yet Gerda went up singing to her room. If she could only see him just for one short quarter of an hour every day! It was not much she wanted—only a kindly word, a look, from this friend who was so much to her.

'I think I should be quite happy so,' she said to herself. But Dr. Lyall would have scorned any such notion of happiness.

'It has come to this—that I must speak,' he thought, as he drove back through the dark streets. 'Am I unreasonable in my impatience? But I want her for my own. I cannot be satisfied until I see her sitting opposite to me day after day, and evening after evening, and know that we are never to part. Will she be surprised when I tell her this? She is very shy with me—hers is a shy, reticent nature—perhaps I may have to teach her what love is'; for Dr. Lyall was singularly humble-minded, and thought himself the last man to attract any woman.

Mrs. Glyn noticed nothing of this under-current. She was passing a miserable day of suspense; the long delay augured no good—she was sure of that.

'Horace must be sifting the matter very thoroughly,' she

thought; but she did not speak of her fears to either of the girls. 'We must not wait dinner,' was all she said to Bessie. 'Your father is never pleased if we wait for him.'

'I dare say he and Walter will have dined with Uncle Sam,' observed Bessie innocently. 'There is always a hot dinner from one to two.'

And then Mrs. Glyn winced slightly. Of course the shopmen had to be fed, and she knew her brother-in-law had old-fashioned patriarchal notions, and liked to preside himself. Horace had often dined in Fleet Street—he was not as thin-skinned as his wife, and Mr. Harding had a capital housekeeper. Sometimes Willie and Nora and Janie spent a day in the City—on the ninth of November, for example—and then the most delectable puddings were served by Mrs. Golding.

Clare could eat nothing; her nerves were all on edge, and the least sound made her shiver. The girls talked softly to each other across the table; once Bessie laughed, and the sound jarred on her mother's ears.

'I think I will go to the drawing-room,' she began, and then her husband's latch-key sounded in the lock.

She had risen from the table as she spoke, but for the moment she had no strength to go and meet them; it was Bessie who ran out into the hall.

'You are so late, father!' she heard her say; 'we have quite finished dinner, but Jane is keeping the joint hot.'

'Tell your mother that we have dined,' returned the Vicar. 'We lunched in Fleet Street; but we had to undergo another meal later on. Send it all away, Bessie! I am going upstairs to get rid of my mud, and then ask your mother to come to me in the study.'

'It is all settled, Mouse,' whispered Walter in her ear; and then he, too, betook himself to his room.

He was not anxious to see his mother just yet, and was quite willing that his father should be spokesman. His pulses were beating with a young man's exhilaration and excitement. Walter was by no means selfish—on the contrary, he was very soft-hearted; but, as he said himself, 'A fellow cannot help his nature;' and love of adventure and novelty was strong within him. Just now he was wound up to such a pitch of exultation that the sight of his mother's sad face and wistful eyes would only damp him.

'Father will do it best,' he thought, as he sprang up three steps at a time to his attic; 'he will smooth matters, and tell her it is all right;' and then in his boyish exuberance he pulled off his boots and began whistling.

Clare heard him as she went to the empty study and waited for her husband.

Clare was in a painful state of tension; her over-wrought nerves gave a slight sharpness to her voice.

'Surely you need not have been quite so long, Horace?' she said reproachfully, as he kissed her; then he passed his hand half caressingly over her brow, as though to smooth out the furrows.

'You have been lonely without us, I am afraid,' he said, looking at her searchingly; 'but, my dear, I assure you that we have not wasted a minute.'

'And yet you have eaten two dinners!' Then the Vicar felt that this thrust was hardly deserved.

Now and then she would speak to him sharply, but at such times he always bore himself with mildness. 'The grand rule of married life,' he would say to her, 'is that a husband and wife should never be cross at the same time;' and he generally acted up to this rule.

'The second dinner was the most important part of the programme, my love,' he returned pleasantly. 'Walter was hungry, and Sam insisted on our partaking of the dinner in Fleet Street. I was obliged to agree, for Walter's sake; but I knew all the time that we were to dine with Mr. Johnston at five—Sam had arranged it beforehand. He said we could talk over things more comfortably.'

Then Clare said no more; she sat down by the fire, and folded her hands upon her lap. She would ask no more questions; her husband should tell her everything in his own way. But as Horace Glyn looked at his wife, he hesitated for a moment, and cleared his throat.

'Of course, we have settled everything, Clare,' he said very gently, as he seated himself beside her, and tried to take her hand; but for once it was not ready for him.

'Everything! What do you mean?' she faltered.

'I mean,' he returned quietly, 'that Walter is to go to Queensland with Mr. Johnston.'

CHAPTER XXVI

'I CANNOT BEAR IT'

'Do not complain of suffering; it teaches you to succour others.'—CARMEN SYLVA.

'Suffering is sensitive and clairvoyant. Happiness has firmer nerves, but not so true an eye.'—*Ibid.*

THE blow had fallen. Ever since early morning Clare had told herself that it must come, that fate had ordained that she and her boy must part; and yet as she heard the fatal words from her husband's lips, her heart seemed to stand still, and, in the language of old, her tongue clave to the roof of her mouth. 'When?—how long?' was all she could gasp, but Mr. Glyn evaded these questions.

'We have been a long time,' he returned, speaking with an attempt at cheerfulness; 'but we have done the whole thing thoroughly. I went over it all with Sam first, and he was decidedly in favour of the Queensland plan. He said Emma approved too.

Then Clare drew herself up proudly.

'Emma!—is Emma Walter's mother?' she exclaimed bitterly. 'Does she know what a mother's heart is?' And then she collapsed miserably.

'My dear——' But he said no more. Could he break this bruised reed? Could he reprove her, when he knew that every nerve was quivering with expectant pain? Had he not better, far better, take her to his heart and tell her that he should be more to her than ten sons? But perhaps the time had not come for such comfort.

'Emma has a kind heart, and she is fond of Walter; however, we need not speak of my sister. But I was anxious to get Sam's opinion—he is sensible and far-seeing, and for good plain common-sense I would back him against any man. He tells me that he has a great respect for Mr. Johnston: that he has excellent principles, and that both Walter and Dick Thornton would be safe with him; and when I saw Johnston I decidedly endorsed this opinion. He is a very gentlemanly man—quite one of your sort, my dear—but he seems terribly cut up at the loss of his wife. He told me everything in the most confidential way, and we got on excellently together.' And thereupon the Vicar launched into a lengthy account of ways and means—the expenses of the voyage and outfit; Walter's prospects; indeed, everything that had passed between him and Mr. Johnston, to which Clare listened passively, though she stored every word in her memory for future rumination.

'So you see we have settled every possible detail,' he finished; 'you will have to be very busy, my dear.'

'You have not told me when he is to go, Horace.'

'Well, no. I was keeping that to the last. I was afraid the shortness of the time would upset you, and I wanted you to be clear about the other things. I am sorry to say that Mr. Johnston's affairs are obliging him to hurry matters; he and Dick Thornton are to start on the second of March, and of course it will be well that Walter should accompany them. When a thing has to be done, it is better to get it over and——'

But this attempt at philosophy died away on his lips as he saw the whiteness of his wife's face.

'The second of March!' she faltered; 'that is only a fortnight. Oh, Horace, Horace! only a fortnight!'

'A fortnight is plenty of time,' he returned, pretending to misunderstand her. 'Anyone can get an outfit in three or four days. I am not going to stint Walter; he shall have everything of the best. He is our eldest son, and a good lad, and deserves all we can do for him. Sam has come out very handsomely, too; he sat down and wrote out a cheque for £50 and put it in Walter's hand. "Your aunt sent her love, and she wants you to come down to The

Briars for a night; and put that in your pocket, boy"—all in his gruff way. Sam has an excellent heart.'

The Vicar was talking still with the same forced cheerfulness. The day had been a hard one, and had tried him much. But no one, not even his wife, should know what it cost him to part with this cherished boy. As for Clare, she had not heard one word. Mr. Harding's generosity had been utterly lost on her. A growing sense of despair, of separation, of an impending trial too hard for her motherhood to bear, was crushing her to the ground. A fortnight, only a fortnight—fourteen days and nights—and then he would leave her! Even her physical strength seemed to fail her; a sort of brain exhaustion, a faintness that numbed her with its deadly cold, was creeping over her. Instinctively she turned to her husband who had never failed her.

'Horace, I cannot bear it—help me!'

'My darling, you shall have all the help that I can give you,' he assured her solemnly; and then, as though she were a child—his own little Janie or Nora—he took her in his arms and let her sob out that tearless agony on his breast.

Then, when she could bear it, he talked to her as only Horace Glyn could talk. He spoke not eloquently, but simply and tenderly of the comfort their boy had been to them, and how they had loved him. And then he showed her, who knew it all so well, how the purest love was most capable of sacrifice, how the children's happiness is dearer to parents than their own.

'We are growing old, my Clare,' he said mournfully. 'We see no longer with the eagle eyes of youth. We no longer sweep the horizon and stretch out our pinions to the infinite. Home is everything to us, but it is not so with Walter.'

'No, Horace; I know that.'

'Yes, but will you try to put yourself in Walter's place, and look at things with his eyes? What is Queensland to him who is the heir of all the ages? Do you suppose the ocean will scare him as it scares us, sitting in our arm-chairs by the fireside?'

Then a faint smile crossed Clare's wan face.

'But we are not really old, Horace. You speak as though we were aged.'

'Yes, but only by comparison with Walter. As far as that goes, I suppose I may call myself in my prime. And yet I feel battered, as though the heat and burden of the day have been very great.'

But Clare only smiled that weary smile again. It was she who was battered, she told herself—she who was worn and jaded with the battle of life, not Horace; but she kept this thought to herself. The brief agony had passed; she could suffer more calmly now.

A week or two later Bessie noticed a gray streak in her mother's hair, and pointed it out to Gerda. Clare held her peace as she heard them. She knew the ravages those two terrible weeks had wrought in her. After all, there are limits. The strain on a woman's heart may be too great. 'If it had only not been Walter!' she had groaned. And yet Clare loved all her children dearly.

'There is one thing we have forgotten, love,' observed the Vicar presently, when they had talked over things a little. 'Walter wants the children to come home; you know how fond he is of Janie;' and to this Clare assented. 'And then there is Willie; I think we must have him here for a night.'

'Does Walter wish that too?'

'No. He did not mention Willie; but all the same, we must not forget him.'

Clare agreed to this, and then she rose.

'Are you going to bed?' he asked in surprise. 'Oh yes, I see it is quite late! But you must not lie down fasting; I shall bring you some wine and a few biscuits.'

'I could not eat anything; but I will take the wine. I am going to Walter now.' But he checked her.

'My dear, not to-night. You are quite unfit to talk to Walter, and it will be hard for him as well as for you;' but for once Clare was not docile to her husband's will.

'Oh, I must see him,' she returned piteously. 'I am not going to talk to him, but only to wish him good-night;' and then he was obliged to let her go.

'It will go heavily with her, I fear,' he said to himself, as he went in search of the wine. But Bessie had been

beforehand; she had a little tray ready for her mother, with some sandwiches that she had cut herself. When she heard her father's step, she came out of her room in her pretty girlish wrapper and kissed him.

'Mother has gone upstairs to see Walter; she looks very ill. Gerda said I must cut some sandwiches, because she has eaten nothing all day.'

'You are a good child, Bessie,' he returned a little shakily. Strange to say, that simple act of thoughtfulness affected him oddly. He turned away quickly, that Bessie should not see the sudden moisture in his eyes, and then he went into his dressing-room and waited for his wife. Clare did not stay long with her boy. She found him still up, and sitting on the edge of his bed in a brown study. His whistling was over; he looked up very gravely as his mother entered. The first glance at her face made his heart sink. What a brute he was to give her all this pain!

'I have come to say good-night, Walter. You must not sit there in the cold, my dear.'

'Oh, mother!' Walter could say no more. Only his arms went round her with remorseful tenderness. Clare yielded to her boy's embrace for a moment. Walter was demonstrative, like her; he took after his mother in many ways. 'I am a selfish brute!' he groaned; 'I have been thinking only of myself;' but she would not allow him to talk in that way.

'You are not selfish; you have never been selfish, darling,' she said, smoothing back a loose lock of hair that was her especial pride. 'Listen to me, my dear; I cannot talk much, I am so tired—so very tired; but I must say one thing—your father has given his consent, and you have mine, too. You are doing quite right; everything is right, and—and you have your mother's blessing, my boy;' and then she bade him good-night.

'I have not been long, have I, Horace?' she said, as she saw her husband waiting for her at the foot of the staircase. It was a little steep, and she panted slightly. 'I did not talk to him. It is very cold up there, but Walter does not seem to feel it.'

'You are cold from utter inanition,' he said anxiously, for her haggard face frightened him. 'Come,' he continued

authoritatively, 'I cannot allow you to make yourself ill; you have to think of me as well as Walter.' And as she looked at him as though she failed to understand the drift of this, he led her to a chair and placed the food before her. No one who had seen him feeding her like a baby, with the utmost patience, would have thought Horace Glyn wanting in tenderness. Clare was too weak and dazed for any opposition; she took what he gave her, and then lay down in her place. Only once she addressed him:

'I think you will have to pray for us both to-night, Horace. I seem to have no power to concentrate my thoughts.' And then he had knelt down beside her and had repeated a collect or two.

'You must sleep, not pray, to-night,' he told her; and Clare turned her weary face to the wall and fell into an exhausted sleep.

After that night he had very little trouble with her. Clare's strength and utter unselfishness helped her through that miserable time, and unless she found herself alone she never broke down.

But her gratitude for her husband's forbearance was intense.

'You were very good to me last night, Horace!' she whispered to him the next day. 'I am afraid I gave you a great deal of trouble, but I was not quite myself.'

'I am ready to take any amount of trouble,' he returned, 'if you will only avail yourself of my help.'

'Yes, dear, I know—you are goodness itself; but I shall need you more by-and-by, when Walter has gone;' and again that exquisite speech of Elkanah's came into the Vicar's mind—'Am I not better to thee than ten sons?'

Clare summoned all her energy and womanly resources to her aid. There was so much to be done, and the time was so short. Walter had his wish, and the little girls were sent home from The Briars—Mrs. Harding's elderly parlourmaid brought them. Walter seemed unfeignedly pleased to see his little sisters. Janie, a pretty, dark-haired child, ran into his arms before she greeted her mother.

'Oh, Wally, must you—must you really go across that horrid big sea?' she exclaimed dolorously, as she flung her arms round his neck.

'I am afraid I must, Janie.'

And then it was Nora's turn. She was not so pretty as Janie, but she had a round, fresh little face, that always reminded Gerda of Doris; and, like Doris, she always followed her sister's lead.

'If I were father or mother, I would not let you go.'

'How would you stop him, Mite?' asked her mother rather sadly. The twins were commonly addressed in the family circle as Midget and Mite; Janie, indeed, refused to answer to any other name.

'Oh, it would be quite easy,' interposed Janie, nodding her head. She was a clever child and an audacious mimic, which often brought her into trouble with older people. 'I know what Mite means. I would say in father's terrible voice, "I cannot allow it, sir. I insist on your giving up this idea." Or if I were mother, I would cry hard all day, and then Wally would be obliged to change his mind.'

'Do you think that would be kind, little one?' returned Clare gently. 'Wally is big enough to make his own plans, and father and I would not try to stop him.'

'Mother is such a brick,' interposed Walter; 'and so is father. Come and look at my new gun that Cousin Gerard sent me;' and then he went off with a little sister clinging to each hand.

The tears dropped on Clare's work as she went on with her stitching. That picture was a lovely one to the mother's eyes. Walter would miss his sisters, she was sure of that —especially his pet Janie. The child had such endearing ways, and made such droll, amusing speeches.

When Willie came home for a night, the family circle was complete. He was a fair, delicate-looking boy, but, like Walter, he had his mother's distinguished air. All Clare's children carried themselves well, and held their heads high. Not even Willie's quaint, mediæval costume could disguise his free, graceful gestures. Willie wore his yellow stockings grandly.

'You must make up to father for all this disappointment, Will,' observed Walter, as the two brothers were preparing to retire to rest. It was late, but Willie had been inspecting the contents of the new trunks, and the gun-case, and the grand tool-box, and all the other treasures that Walter

had acquired during the last ten days. 'You see, poor old dad had set his heart on sending me to Oxford, and making me a parson; but I could not do it, Will.'

'It was precious rough on father,' replied Willie, sticking his thumbs into his leathern belt and frowning horribly. Willie always frowned when he had a 'big think.' 'If father tells me I may go to Oxford, I shall be ready with my answer—"Oxford and dad for ever!"' And then he hitched up his coat, and vaulted neatly into the middle of Walter's bed.

Another time he would have been soundly pommelled by his elder brother, and a pillow fight—or an 'odds-and-ends fight,' as Willie called it—would have been the result, all sorts of handy articles being available as missiles; but Walter was in a serious mood.

'Don't be an ass!' he returned shortly, and Willie at once subsided. 'If you are so glad to get rid of me, you can relieve your feelings on your own bed.'

Then Willie turned decidedly rusty.

'You are an ass yourself, to say that,' he remarked sulkily; and he walked off in high dudgeon, to be followed and soothed by Walter.

'What an idiot you are, Will! Fancy turning off rusty at a word! I wanted to talk to you seriously, without any foolery. But you are such a jackanapes. You see,' putting his arm round his young brother's neck, 'I want you to be awfully good to mother when I go away.'

Then Willie sniffed. He was a warm-hearted little lad, and he worshipped his big brother. He felt that only that sniff saved him from a hearty fit of crying.

'You need not have said that I was glad you were going,' he grumbled.

'But I did not mean it, Will. I know you are awfully sorry. Look here; I have left you all my belongings: there is the dressing-case Uncle Sam gave me—I could not think of taking it—besides, I have that capital fitted bag; and there are my cricket-bat and writing-case—old, but full of handy things—and my books. I told mother you should have them.'

Willie's blue eyes opened rather widely at this.

'Do you mean to say they are really mine—the cricket

bat and all? Why,' regarding him with awe, 'it sounds as though you were going to die, and had made your will.'

But Walter only laughed.

'You must not use the dressing-case until you are older, Will; it has real silver mountings. I like my bag best that father and mother and Doris gave me; but it will do for you when you go to Oxford. I am so glad you like the idea of being a parson.'

'Oh, I always meant to be one,' returned Willie nonchalantly, with his eyes fixed on the cricket-bat; 'I intend to be a rattling good one, like father, so the "dearly beloved," as Jeff calls them, had better look out. I say, Walter, am I to have your tool-box, too?'

'Of course! Have I not just shown you the one Aunt Emma sent me? Now, old man, shut up, for I am getting sleepy,' and then silence reigned in the attic.

Walter fell asleep as soon as his head touched the pillow, but Willie drew the bedclothes over his ears and had his cry out—the tool-box, the dressing-case, even the cricket-bat failed to comfort him when he remembered that next holidays there would be no Walter.

'It is a big shame!' groaned Willie, with a vague idea that Fate was somehow to blame for all this. 'I shall hate home without old Walter.'

But Willie was a Spartan, in his boyish way. He went off the next evening, looking rather glum, but without any outward lamentation—only when Walter, on the moment's impulse, kissed the lad's forehead, he flushed up to the roots of his hair and turned away rather abruptly.

'Good-bye, Will—don't forget to write to me.'

'All right!' was the husky answer, and Willie marched off, glad that the darkness hid his face, and trying vainly to swallow the big lump in his throat that somehow choked him when he attempted to speak.

'Poor little chap,' thought Walter as he walked back from the gate, and then he sat down by his mother and called Janie to have a game of cat's-cradle with him, while Nora curled herself up on the rug, and watched them with envious eyes—the twins did so love playing cat's-cradle with Walter.

CHAPTER XXVII

WALTER LEAVES HOME

'I go to prove my soul!
I see my way as birds their trackless way.
I shall arrive! What time, what circuit first,
I ask not; but unless God sends His hail
Or blinding fireballs, sleet, or stifling snow,
In some time—His good time—I shall arrive.
He guides me and the bird. In His good time.'

ROBERT BROWNING.

DR. LYALL called several times at St. Jude's Vicarage during that fortnight that preceded Walter's departure. He was on intimate terms with the Vicar and his wife, and such visits were regarded by them as a matter of course; but he never stayed long, neither did he ask Gerda to sing to him. It was felt by both that such a request would have been in bad form. He always found the ladies busy; Mrs. Glyn would say a greeting word, then would at once resume her needle, and the two girls would follow her example.

Dr. Lyall was perfectly satisfied with this arrangement. He liked to sit in that comfortable chair, and watch one pair of busy hands. Sometimes he would address Gerda pointedly, as though insisting on including her in the conversation, but oftener he left her alone. But Gerda never felt hurt. He always found an opportunity to say a few words before he took his leave. He would get up from his seat, and stroll to the little table where she sat rather apart from the others, and these moments were very precious to

Gerda. All the world might have heard those few sentences, but the tone and the meaning could only have been interpreted by her. Once Bessie had gone out with Walter and the twins, and Mrs. Glyn had been called away to speak to a poor woman, and Dr. Lyall at once left his chair. He stood for a moment, as though examining some neckties that were on the table. Then he said abruptly: 'Mrs. Glyn looks very ill.'

Gerda started.

'Oh no, I hope not. I trust she is not really ill, but all this is so trying for her.'

'It is certainly very trying for them both. Walter is such a bright fellow.'

'When Aunt Clare comes back shall I leave the room? Perhaps you could speak to her about her health. I am quite sure that she is very far from well, and she eats so little.'

'One can see that from her face, but I do not suppose that she will consult me. She is almost as obstinate in her own way as the Vicar is in his. But perhaps I will take the liberty of an old friend to lecture her.'

'Oh, do, please! Bessie and I will be so grateful to you.'

'Very well, so be it. I suppose'—hesitating—'I shall find you in the dining-room when I have finished?'

'Oh yes; and you shall give me your report,' she answered demurely.

But this little ruse deceived neither of them. It would only give Dr. Lyall a good opportunity to dawdle away a few more agreeable moments. What did it matter what they talked about—the bad weather, Walter's outfit, or Mrs. Glyn's failing health? There was another language they talked as well—a silent language, which both understood perfectly.

After all, Gerda's little plan wholly failed. Mrs. Glyn could not be made to take any interest in her health, and she received Dr. Lyall's friendly lecture with something like impatience.

'Gerda has asked you to talk to me,' she said, trying to laugh it off.

Dr. Lyall did not contradict her

'They are all so anxious about you. You know you are feeling ill, Mrs. Glyn, and that you ought to consult me.'

But she shook her head. 'I think I shall quote Shakespeare to you, Dr. Lyall.'

'Of course I understand you. But there is something more than "the mind diseased." You had better let me prescribe for you. Shall I send you a sedative?'

'No, no,' she returned hurriedly. And he saw how her lips quivered. 'I do not want to sleep more than I do now. Indeed, Dr. Lyall, you are very good, but you can do nothing for me just now.'

'You will let me do nothing,' he returned lightly, but he forbore to press the point. 'She will not be able to do without me long,' he said to Gerda, after he had acquainted her with his non-success. 'She is trying to brave it out, but the effort is too great for her. When Walter has really gone she will succumb, and then the Vicar will be alarmed, and send for me.'

'But can nothing be done to prevent this?'

'I think not. She is too restless and unhappy to listen to reason. And, unfortunately, we cannot treat her as we could Janie—put her to bed, and insist on her stopping there. You can only look after her, and give her some light nourishment frequently. Of course, she is not taking her meals properly, so you must supplement them as much as possible.'

'I think I shall tell Uncle Horace what you say.'

'If I were you I should not bring the Vicar into it; he will soon see things for himself, and when he gets a notion into his head, it is not easy to turn his attention in any other direction. Look after her yourself, and see she has all possible help. I know I can trust you,' with a significant smile as he took his leave.

'Can you let yourself out, Dr. Lyall?'

'Why, of course I can. By-the-bye,' coming back to her, 'when are you going to Daintree House again? Hester was talking about you this morning.'

'She is so busy that I am afraid of troubling her; but all the same, I should like to see her.'

'You will not trouble her; you will do her good. She has so few friends. Why not look in on her on Wednesday

afternoon? she will give you some tea—and she shall give me some too,' he added mentally.

'I should like it of all things; but Wednesday is Walter's last evening, and it would be so unkind to leave them.'

'Ah, true, I forgot that. Saturday, then. I shall tell her you will see her on Saturday.'

'I will certainly call one day,' returned Gerda, a little confused at this persistence. With all her innocence she was not blind to Dr. Lyall's obvious meaning. 'He must not think I go there to meet him,' she said to herself. But this evident reluctance, this shy withdrawal, only made her more charming in his eyes. If she had met him half-way; if she had responded too readily to his broad hints, she would not have so wholly fascinated him.

'I will get Hester to ask her, and then she will have no excuse, and Bessie shall come too.' And then he went off more in love with her than ever.

Gerda carried out Dr. Lyall's instructions most conscientiously. She took Bessie into her confidence, and Mrs. Glyn found herself waited upon and tended with a quiet consideration that insensibly soothed her. Gerda relieved her of all parish work; she spent long uncongenial hours in Mrs. Glyn's district, or at the mothers' meetings.

'I do not think the women like me,' she observed once to the Vicar, as, one gray afternoon, she prepared to sally forth on a round of visits. 'It is not very easy to replace Aunt Clare; she knows exactly what to say to everyone.'

'You are young and have much to learn,' he returned. 'Even in district visiting practice makes perfect. You are very good to your aunt, my dear. I hardly know what she would do without you.'

'Oh, Uncle Horace!' and Gerda actually blushed with pleasure. He had never spoken to her so kindly before; certainly he had never called her 'My dear.' He was a man who reserved all terms of endearment for his wife and children, and even to them he was sparing of soft phrases; but now he was looking at her with a benignant expression, as though she were Bessie. How could she know that he bade God bless her as he closed the door after her?

Poor Horace Glyn! he was sorely troubled and perplexed just then. For the first time in their married life he found

himself solitary. Clare had simply no time to give him: her thoughts, her looks, the untiring labour of her hands, were all for her boy; she could not bear to be absent from the room where Walter was. If her husband detained her for a moment, she seemed restless and *distraite*, and he could tell from her absent replies that she was listening for another voice. But he did not reproach her.

'Am I keeping you too long?' he said once. 'Never mind, I will finish the business by myself; you shall go back to Walter.'

'Can you really do without me?' she asked, as though ashamed of her selfishness. 'I will stay if you like, Horace; but—but I shall have so little time with him.' Then a sharp pang seemed to go through Horace Glyn's heart. It was his pain too. Did she not know that? Was not the lad his son as well as hers? But he would not hint at this; he would prove his unselfishness by leaving them together as much as possible.

'No, dear, no; I want nothing more,' he assured her, and she left the study with a look of relief.

Poor Clare! it was not strange that her husband found it a little difficult to understand her. A sad change had passed over the bright, quick-witted woman, with her maternal softness and ready sympathy. She was no longer patient and tolerant of trifles; she complained almost bitterly that she could have so little of her boy.

'There are so many to claim him,' she would sigh. Walter once told her that she was unreasonable; he, poor fellow! no longer sought his mother's sole company. In spite of her efforts she could not always summon up a smile, and the sight of her pale face was a constant reproach to him. Walter liked to walk with his father sometimes, to have his little sisters hanging upon him. Their constant questions, their perpetual invitations to cat's-cradle, did not tease him as they teased Clare. 'Janie, you are too noisy,' she said once, rather sharply, though noise had never troubled her before. 'Why do you not send her away, Walter, and Nora too?'

'No, no, I like to have them,' he returned, as Janie clasped him close, and then he pulled her on his knee, with a whispered monition to be quiet. Nora curled herself up

behind his chair like a little mouse. There was no more fun, no tugging at fair and dark locks. Was Clare any the happier as she looked at the subdued faces? Walter had grown a little bored or sad, Janie was half-asleep, and Nora had coaxed the kitten into her lap. 'Oh, how selfish I am!' she thought. 'If I go away, they will all begin their games again;' and she actually left the room for a little. As she went upstairs she could hear Janie shriek—the hair-pulling had recommenced. Hark! a chair had fallen—Walter was chasing the little sisters about the room. Mr. Glyn heard the sounds, even through his study-door, and smiled benevolently.

'He is such a lad!' he said to himself. 'God grant he may keep his lad's heart for many a year.'

There was another difficulty. Clare was not always willing to be helped. She developed a strange sort of jealousy with regard to Walter's clothes. She made it evident to Gerda and Bessie that there were certain things she wished to do herself.

'Do not touch Walter's socks,' she said once, as Bessie innocently took up a pair; 'I am going to mark them myself.' And then she added, with unusual acerbity, 'You are too officious, Bessie.'

It was in the evening. Mr. Glyn was sitting reading by the fire. He found his study dull, and had made some sort of excuse for lingering in the family circle. Gerda was upstairs, and Walter had retired to bid Janie and Nora goodnight. They had whispered an entreaty to this effect as they had kissed him. Clare had overheard Janie, and her brow had clouded a little. Walter would be away a long time. The children were tiresome; they were too exacting, Janie especially; and then Bessie had touched the sacred pile.

Mr. Glyn looked up quickly. He saw how poor Bessie shrank back at her mother's sharp tones—she was a sensitive little soul, and a harsh word crushed her.

'My dear!' he remonstrated, 'Bessie only wanted to help you.'

'But she should wait until I ask her, Horace,' returned Clare impatiently. 'I want no help. I like doing Walter's things myself.'

'Perhaps Bessie shares this feeling,' he replied quietly, as he took up his book again. Bessie had left the room in tears. Clare took no apparent notice. She made no reply to her husband's remark, and he wisely forbore to say any more. Never once had he seen her lacking in tenderness to her children or himself; never before had she so failed in patience. 'My poor Clare!' he sighed, and something seemed to blur the distinctness of the printed page for a moment. When Bessie came back to wish her parents good-night, she found her mother alone.

'Walter has gone to bed,' she said; 'his long walk has tired him, and your father is writing in the study. I have finished all the socks, Bessie. Is it not a grand pile?' and then, as she saw Bessie's swollen eyes, she patted her cheek kindly. 'Oh, you foolish Mouse!' she said tenderly, 'to mind your cross old mother's grumbling.'

'I only wanted to help you,' sobbed Bessie, 'and—and Walter.'

'Oh, don't begin again, Bessie,' exclaimed Clare wearily, and then she wiped the girl's eyes with her own handkerchief; 'don't make me feel how horrid I am to everyone;' and Bessie was so shocked at this apology that her tears dried at once.

Clare tried hard to recover her self-command, but again and again her worn nerves played her false; but for her husband's forbearance and Gerda's real and efficient help, she would have broken down before ten days were over.

On the last evening she obeyed a summons to the study with unusual reluctance. 'I am afraid I cannot stay, Horace,' she began; 'could not Bessie do as well?'

'No, dear; Bessie would be no use to me. I will not detain you five minutes. I only want to speak to you about to-morrow.' Then he felt the shiver that passed over her. 'You know Sam offered to see Walter off from the docks, but Walter would far rather that I should go.'

'Of course he would rather have his father. Surely you intend to go with him, Horace?'

'Do you mean to accompany us?' he asked abruptly.

'I?—oh no!' her face paling at the thought. 'I could not—I could not bear it.'

'Neither could I bear it for you. You have taken a

weight off my mind: but, all the same, it was for you to decide, not for me.'

'And you will go with the poor boy, will you not?'

'It is my desire to do so, if you can do without me. But, my dear, it will be late; there will be no possibility of my return before morning—and how am I to leave you?'

'Oh, you must not think of me. I shall do very well. It is only Walter that we must consider.'

But he shook his head at this.

'I must consider you, too. I wish I could divide myself between you—half for you and half for Walter.'

'Dear Horace, you are so good to both of us! You have been so patient with me! Indeed—indeed I will be brave;' and then she kissed him and went back to her boy.

The mother and son had a long talk together that night. To Clare it was a sweet, solemn hour, and she went on the strength of it all through that night and the next day. After all, Clare carried out her intention, and Walter saw his mother's face last with a smile on it—that soft, luminous smile that tells so much. It was the lad himself who broke down. Clare thought she heard a half-smothered entreaty for forgiveness, as though he had somehow failed in his duty by leaving her, but she would not allow him to finish.

'God bless you, my own! You have done rightly, bravely. You are my dear good boy—always!' and so she sent him away.

The Vicar involuntarily lingered for a moment; he felt torn in two: both needed him. But Clare motioned him away impatiently.

'Go—go!' she said. 'You must not leave him. What does it matter about me?' and he obeyed her reluctantly.

Clare walked back to the drawing-room very quietly; there was still that soft look on her face, as though she felt her boy's eager kisses.

'Will you stay with Bessie and the children, Gerda?' she said. 'I am going upstairs. I would rather be alone.'

Gerda found her task a difficult one. Janie shed torrents of tears, and refused to be comforted, and Nora cried too, half out of sympathy.

'It is not right—it is cruel of Wally to leave us!' exclaimed Janie rebelliously, between her sobs.

Gerda took her in her lap, and Nora nestled up to her too; but it was a long time before Janie's grieved little heart ceased to heave so piteously. Bessie left them after a time. When she came down she told Gerda that her mother was lying down and did not wish to be disturbed. Janie began afresh when she heard this. Everything was so dismal—the house felt as though someone lay dead in it. Janie did not actually formulate this, but the sense of emptiness and desertion oppressed her childish mind. Gerda had to put her and Nora to bed at last, and to sit beside them until they fell asleep.

She told Dr. Lyall afterwards that it was very touching to see Janie with an old gray cap of Walter's hugged in her arms. Nora had begged to have the kitten.

'They are such dear children,' she finished. 'But I think Janie is my favourite, as well as Walter's: she reminds me so often of Aunt Clare.'

Mr. Glyn passed a wretched night in his big hotel bedroom. Mr. Harding, who had accompanied them to the docks, proposed that he should return with him to The Briars, but he refused.

'You are very kind, Sam; but you and Emma must excuse me to-night,' he said in a jaded tone.

'Horace is terribly cut up at parting with the lad,' observed Mr. Harding afterwards to his wife. She was sitting up for him in the snug little parlour that was called the morning-room. Mr. Harding's well-warmed slippers were on his tired feet; the remains of an excellent supper had just been cleared away; his wife sat opposite him, looking brisk and wide-awake in her handsome evening gown—she was a good-looking woman and knew how to dress herself. 'Of course I left them together at the last. I could feel for Horace, although I have no son of my own;' and Mr. Harding slowly puffed at his pipe.

His wife sighed. This was the one drop of bitterness in their cup—both of them had desired children, but the blessing had been denied them.

'He is a fine lad, Emma,' finished her husband mournfully—'a fine, manly young fellow! Well, I would have given him a berth over and over again, but he turned up his nose at the Fleet Street business. It might have been

"Harding and Glyn," who knows?—and Walter might have had his carriage and pair, too. But no, he preferred to tramp it in the colonies.'

'He has Clare's pride—he takes after his mother. Well, he has made his bed, and must just lie on it. When you have finished that pipe, Samuel'—Mrs. Harding never called her husband Sam—'you may as well lock up the whisky and come to bed, for you are as tired as tired can be;' and, as usual, Mr. Harding obeyed this conjugal advice.

Walter, lying in his berth, heard the groaning and the throbbing of the vast engines as they steamed into the open sea. The rolling of the great waves was in his ears; his mother's words seemed to blend with them: 'You are my dear good boy—always!'

And Horace Glyn, tossing uncomfortably on his soft bed, thought pitifully of the lad who had left his side to be buffeted by the cold, outside world. How willingly would he have kept him safely beside him! but his will had not been Walter's.

'God keep him unspotted from the world,' he prayed; and Clare, lying open-eyed in the darkness, was saying the same words over and over again—'pure and unspotted from the world; the same good heart, the same simple, boyish nature, the same true, brave lad that he has always been—my Walter! my Walter!'

CHAPTER XXVIII

DR. LYALL'S PATIENT

'Every man who finds himself in the wrong has learned something.'
—LORD HOUGHTON.

'When you suffer much you see the world at a great distance, as though it lay in an immense desert. Even the voices seem to come from afar.'—CARMEN SYLVA.

WHEN Mr. Glyn returned home the next day, he found his wife still in her room. She was lying, partly dressed, upon her bed; a sort of faintness had come over her as she was about to leave her room, so she had thought it best to lie down again. All this she explained very quietly to her husband as he sat beside her.

'I never saw you look worse,' he said uneasily. 'I think I shall ask Lyall to see you.'

But Clare protested that she was not ill; she was tired and wanted rest; she had been a good deal tried; and then she begged that he would tell her about Walter.

Mr. Glyn gave her full particulars. He described the vessel and the exact position of the cabin that Walter was to share with his two friends.

'It is a splendid vessel; everything is admirably arranged, and Johnston says the captain is a fine fellow. Walter will have every possible comfort, and there are some pleasant people on board—Johnston knows some of them.'

'And Walter? What about Walter?' asked Clare, hungry for news of her boy.

'Walter,' returned her husband reluctantly: 'I do not

know that I have much to tell you about him. He was very quiet, and followed me about everywhere when Johnston took me over the vessel. They thought it better that I should see everything; Sam proposed it, and——'

'Oh, never mind Sam!' with a sudden flush of annoyance. Clare's nerves were not quite under control yet.

'Sam showed very proper feeling, my dear,' returned the Vicar in a tone of reproof. 'He left us alone for the last quarter of an hour.'

'Yes, yes—and what did Walter say?'

'He said very little; only he sent his love to you and Bessie and the children. You see, it was very trying just at the last, and the poor lad was rather low—I believe I did most of the talking; and then Sam fetched me, and we had to be off in a hurry.'

Clare sighed heavily. After all, there was not much to hear, and yet she could fill in that somewhat bald description. Of course she could picture it all! Horace would not own it to her, but most likely he had been too much overwhelmed by the parting to know exactly what either of them had said.

'It must have been bad for you, too,' she said in a low voice; and even those few words seemed to be a solace to him. Somehow, he did not feel quite so sore-hearted as he sat there, with his wife's soft hand in his. He had been solitary enough for the past fortnight, but now he had her to himself again. Clare's quick eyes read something of this in his face.

'Poor Horace! you shall not have to complain of me again;' and then she drew his head down and told him that his hair was growing gray, and that hers was too. 'We are quite a Darby and Joan,' she said, with an innocent little attempt at a joke. 'I hope we shall not be very, very old when Walter——' And then she stopped and burst into tears. Oh, the weary years—the long weary years—before she could see her boy's face!

Dr. Lyall had been a true prophet, and Clare remained in the same unsatisfactory condition for days. She spoke little about her own feelings, but Gerda was sure the faintness had returned more than once, and at last she spoke to the Vicar.

'Aunt Clare is always lying down now,' she said; 'and I can see she has no strength for her duties. She allows Bessie and me to do all that there is to do.' But Mr. Glyn refused to share her anxiety.

'We must give her time to recover herself,' he said, trying to persuade himself as he spoke that there was nothing really amiss with her—he was no alarmist on matters of health. 'Walter has only been away five days, and she has been fretting after him.'

'It is not only Walter,' returned Gerda, wishing that Uncle Horace would sometimes condescend to see with other people's eyes. 'I think if Dr. Lyall were to see her he would do her good.'

'She begged me not to send for him; still, if you think she ought to see him—but, my dear, there is no hurry for a day or so;' and Gerda was obliged to be content with this concession.

But before twenty-four hours were over Mr. Glyn thought fit to alter his mind. The following afternoon Clare had dragged herself from the couch, where she was hearing Janie's lessons, to help her husband with some parochial accounts, in which she had always been his able assistant, and a prolonged fainting fit had been the result.

When Gerda was summoned, she found the Vicar rubbing his wife's cold hands, and looking very frightened. 'Tell some one to go for Lyall,' he said, and then he had applied himself again to restore Clare to consciousness. Happily, Dr. Lyall met the messenger, and came at once to the Vicarage. He helped Mr. Glyn carry her to her room. When Clare had recovered sufficiently to be left to Gerda's care, he followed the Vicar into the study.

'I knew it must come to this. Why did you not send for me before?' he said rather abruptly, as he sat down to write a prescription; 'Mrs. Glyn has been looking ill for a long time.'

'It is the parting with her boy,' began the Vicar; but Dr. Lyall cut him short. He warmly respected his Vicar, but he had his own notions of a husband's duties, and he thought the time had come to speak very plainly.

'Oh yes, she has been fretting; under the circumstances

that is perfectly natural. But Walter's going has not made his mother ill.'

'What on earth do you mean, Lyall?'

'I mean that Mrs. Glyn's indisposition, or whatever you like to call it, is of long standing, and is due to other causes, and that her trouble at parting with Walter has only accelerated the mischief. Your wife is suffering from a severe form of nervous prostration; she has simply overworked herself for years.'

'Good God!' But this was no irreverence on the Vicar's part.

'I assure you I am stating the truth,' went on Dr. Lyall, who had no intention of mincing matters. Dr. Lyall's patients, or rather their relatives, always heard the truth from him. 'You work too hard yourself to be a fair judge. As your wife's medical adviser, it is my duty to tell you that her strength and nerves have been so seriously overtaxed that I doubt if she will ever enjoy good health again.'

Mr. Glyn sat down in his big chair; he was simply stunned.

'Do you mean—do you mean——' But his tongue refused its office; he could not finish his sentence. Clare—his Clare!

Dr. Lyall hastened to reassure him.

'Oh, things are not so bad as all that! I did not mean that she is going to die; but her condition is sufficiently serious to put a veto on all work for the next twelve months. You must not think I have come to a hasty conclusion, my dear Vicar; I have had good opportunities for judging Mrs. Glyn's case, and I assure you that no woman of her temperament could go on as she has been doing ever since I have had the pleasure of knowing her.'

'She has worked hard,' replied Mr. Glyn—'we all work hard—but she never complained that she felt her duties too much for her.'

'Not to you, perhaps; she would be reluctant to add to your burdens. But to others she has implied that the day has been over-full of work—to my sister, for example, and to Miss Meredith.'

'But not to me—not to her husband, though I would have smoothed everything for her!'

'Oh, we all know that,' returned Dr. Lyall cheerily, for he was quite satisfied with the impression he had made. If the Vicar had been blind, he had now sufficiently opened his eyes. 'You only wanted me to give you a hint, which I had no chance of giving before. I shall have you to back me up when I issue my orders.'

Mr. Glyn looked at him gloomily; the morbid side of his conscience was roused.

'But, all the same, I ought to have seen it for myself. Yes, you are right; she has done far too much. The care of the house—we have only two servants, and there is much to do—and teaching the children, and all the outside work, and parish accounts, and——' He paused.

'Mrs. Glyn is like Hester. She takes other people's burdens as well as her own; but Hester has a stronger constitution; in spite of her hard work, I am never afraid for her. Well, I must be going. I will see Mrs. Glyn again to-morrow; at present our task will be easy enough. She will be too weak to dispute our orders for some time to come.' And in this prognostication Dr. Lyall was perfectly correct.

The collapse had been sudden and severe; but the doctor's professional insight had long expected this result. No one but Clare herself knew how excessive had been the strain on mind and body during the years of her married life.

It was not so much the change from ease and luxury to comparative poverty that had tried her; she had had other difficulties to surmount: she had had patiently to unlearn as far as possible the traditions that had been so dear to her, and to strive to submit herself to the narrow domestic creed and robust asceticism that Horace Glyn imposed upon his household. The very effort to lift herself to his lofty standard of duty was exhausting to her free, untamed nature. Many men had high views of duty; but few strove so persistently to bring their daily life into harmony with such views. But Clare loved her husband too well to be content with a lower plane than his. And then, again, though the faithful wife refused to own this even to herself, Horace Glyn was a somewhat arbitrary and exacting husband. His wife must be his constant companion; there

must be no divided interest between those whom God had joined together—this is how he would have put it. In plain words, his wife's society was necessary to his full content; he liked to have her there beside him, however busy he might be. Dr. Lyall was quite aware that Mrs. Glyn sacrificed the hours she might have devoted to needful rest, that she might stay beside her husband, and that the midnight-oil was burnt very freely at St. Jude's Vicarage.

Mr. Glyn pondered these things heavily when the doctor had left him; he remembered with sharp pangs of remorse how white and weary Clare had often looked, and yet she had always refused to leave him. 'I am tired, but I would rather stay!'—that was how she had answered him.

He recalled a speech of the elder Gerald, which he had heard in the days of their engagement.

'Clare is game to the backbone; she is like my black bantam cock: she will die, but she will never give in.' Well, her cousin had been right!

Horace Glyn was taking himself to task severely, as usual. He was his own accuser, judge, jury in one. 'Evil is wrought by want of thought, as well as want of heart,' he muttered; 'but as far as I have power to set things right, they shall be set right.' And no one could doubt that he would keep his word.

Clare received her husband's tender ministrations very passively. The active brain was clouded and torpid. She lay day after day upon her pillows, thinking of her boy or sleeping like a baby. She took whatever was given her, and was a model patient, as Dr. Lyall once told her jokingly.

But one evening, as her husband sat beside her, the heaviness of his aspect roused her benumbed faculties.

'Horace,' she said feebly, 'I am not ill—not very ill, am I?'

'No, love! Why should you ask such a question? Lyall thinks you are certainly better to-day.'

'I am more awake, but I still feel as if the bed will not hold me. Do you know that horrible sinking feeling? But I never thought myself very ill. I wonder why you all make such a fuss over me'—trying to speak with her old sprightliness.

'We are only carrying out Lyall's orders. You have run down, and we are all trying to build you up again. Now you must take your medicine and go to sleep.' And Clare willingly obeyed him.

She told Dr. Lyall the next day that she was afraid that she should sleep herself away. 'I have a perfect passion for sleep,' she added, with a smile.

'I will give you leave to gratify that passion as much as you like,' he answered, with his hand still on her pulse. 'You have long arrears of rest to make up, and Nature is demanding her dues.'

'But surely I ought to rouse myself?' she asked plaintively. 'I make no efforts to be better. My one wish is to lie still and be quiet. I do not want even my husband to talk to me.'

'Quite right,' was the encouraging answer. 'When the Vicar begins, you must just shut your eyes, and pretend to go to sleep. He will take the hint in a moment.'

Clare's weary face brightened perceptibly.

'Do you mean that I am not to try to get well?'

'Oh, you will get well by-and-by,' he returned soothingly. 'The age of miracles is past, and slow and sure is the motto now for sick people. There must be no trying. I put my veto on that. Eat, drink, and sleep, and think as little as possible.'

'You are treating me as though I were a baby,' she complained.

But it was evident that the prescription suited her, and she mended perceptibly from that day.

Mr. Glyn thought it a most tedious convalescence. As time went on, he was obliged to leave her in Gerda's care, and go about his business. His wife's weakness and incapacity doubled his work. At times he felt almost lost without her. Bessie was too young and inexperienced to assist him, and Gerda could not be spared from the sick-room. The girl's quiet ways suited Clare admirably—she moved about the room without fuss or noise. Dr. Lyall told her once that nursing was her undoubted forte. How Gerda blushed with delight as she heard the doctor's commendation. Mrs. Glyn's sick-room was an enchanted paradise for them both. Those daily visits, those brief conversations exchanged

in the passage or on the staircase, were the chief events of Gerda's day: and to Dr. Lyall—but there is no word to express what they were to him? Day by day the girl's sweetness pervaded his whole being, her voice lingered in his ear as he drove away from the door; the image of a slender figure in a gray gown, with coils of fair hair, would be ever beside him. One day he would speak, and then she would know what he felt for her. Would that day come soon?

Often of an evening Hester would steal away from her labours, and spend an hour beside her friend's couch. Pamela often came, too, but she was never admitted to the sick-room. Gerda would go down to her and pacify her with kind messages. 'No one ever wants me but Derrick,' poor Pamela would say, with tears in her eyes. 'Hester is admitted; I dare say she is sitting with Mrs. Glyn now. What harm should I do just to kiss her, and give her these flowers?'

'She shall have your flowers, Pamela dear,' replied Gerda, gently; 'Aunt Clare does so like flowers, but you have no idea how weak she is. Mrs. Vincent does not talk to her; she is as quiet as possible. Even Janie and Nora do not see her every day.'

'Oh, you are a model nurse, as Alick says,' returned Pamela contemptuously; 'you are all in league against poor little me. Mrs. Glyn wants rousing, I am quite sure of that; such deadly quiet can do no one good. When I am ill Dr. Brown shall attend me, and not Alick, and my friends shall sit in rows along the room if they like,' and Pamela walked off in a pet. But she came again the next day, and, indeed, nearly every evening, and she always had a fresh argument, that half-amused and half-exasperated Gerda.

'I do think you love to provoke people,' she said one evening.

Pamela nodded. 'To be sure I do; contradiction is good for everybody. You were looking as bored as possible when you came downstairs just now, so says I to myself—that is how Mrs. Muggins talks—"I will just wake the model nurse up," and now you are as lively as possible. I am going home now to experiment on the model doctor—ta-ta, my dear!' and Pamela vanished, after her usual abrupt fashion

Perhaps Pamela had some ground for discontent just then. Dr. Lyall was more absent and preoccupied than usual. He found little to say when he and Pamela sat down to their frugal meal; ordinary topics did not interest him, he paid scant attention to the stream of talk that flowed from the other side of the table. Only one subject riveted his attention. Any remark on St. Jude's Vicarage, or on the Vicarage folk, seemed to rouse him effectually. Pamela soon discovered this, and she punished him by never mentioning her evening visits. 'If Alick does not choose to make me his confidante,' she thought, 'he will have no help from me; of course Hester knows everything.' But in this she did her brother injustice; Dr. Lyall was not a man to seek sympathy in his love affairs. Hester had no suspicion that his affections were so deeply engaged.

It was five weeks before Clare was carried into her husband's study, and placed on the old well-worn couch that had always been kept for her use.

Dr. Lyall had suggested that a change of scene would be beneficial to his patient by-and-by, and Mrs. Meredith had written with Sir Godfrey's consent to propose that Gerda should bring her back with her. Dr. Lyall had not tabooed this scheme; but he told the Vicar that there must be no long journey until the middle of May, and it was only the end of March now. He would have preferred himself that sea-air should have been tried first, but Clare had a hankering for her old home.

Gerda wrote to ask her mother how long she could be spared. 'I want to see you all, of course, and I have already been here nearly two months; but I greatly fear that Aunt Clare cannot spare me yet, and, indeed, I could hardly bring myself to leave her in her weak state.' But to this letter there had been as yet no reply.

As Mr. Glyn comfortably established his wife on her couch, he noticed a certain apprehensive glance at his writing-table, which was heaped up with an accumulation of pamphlets and papers.

Clare still had a white, shrunken look, and the delicacy of her aspect was more perceptible now than ever, and yet Dr. Lyall had assured the Vicar that very morning that he was quite satisfied with the progress she was making.

'Your table has not been tidied since I have been upstairs, Horace,' she said, with the return of the old fretful strain in her voice.

'No, my dear; I begged Bessie not to touch it. I have had some important papers mislaid. These young helpers are over-zealous. See, I will turn your couch, so that your eyes shall not be offended by the litter.' And as he effected the change, he stooped over her and kissed her brow. 'It is good to have you here again, my wife.'

'Thank you, dear.' And then she sighed and her face clouded. 'Horace, what has come to me? Sit down; I must tell you something that is troubling me. I ought to be so pleased to be here in this room again, and yet——' She paused, as though unwilling to hurt him.

'But all the same you are not pleased.' He spoke lightly, but oh the sharp pang at hearing her imply this!

'No,' she whispered, 'I am not pleased. Is it very wrong, Horace?—but the sight of those papers oppresses me. You must have wanted me so much, my poor dear, and now—now I have no strength to do anything,' with a little sob.

'Do you think I do not know that?' very tenderly. 'Why have you feared to trust your husband, Clare? Do you forget the words I spoke nineteen years ago in Chesterton Church—when I promised to comfort as well as to love you; to hold you in sickness as well as in health?' Then, as she turned and clung to him, he continued solemnly, almost reproachfully: 'Is it treating me well that you should be over-burdened, and not suffer me to help you? Why did you not say to me, as we sat here together night after night, that your daily work was too heavy, and that I must relieve you of some of your tasks?'

'I was afraid you would think me weak,' she whispered, with tears in her voice.

'True, but I should not have blamed you for such weakness. How is a woman to be endued with a man's strength? At least, I should have known you well enough not to doubt your willingness. But after all, it has been my fault. If I had not been so blind I should have found out things for myself. Clare, I will have no more of this; do you know Dr. Lyall has forbidden all such work for the future?'

'He has forbidden it at present, certainly; but, Horace,

I shall soon be stronger; let me go away and enjoy the sweet country air for a time, and then I shall come home refreshed.'

But Clare was not speaking the whole truth about herself. A strong foreboding told her that her power for steady, continuous work was gone. Her assumed bravery did not deceive her husband. He was far too used to dealing with human nature not to detect a certain failure of courage in her tone.

'You shall go away,' he returned firmly, 'as soon as Dr. Lyall gives you permission to go, and you shall remain under your father's roof as long as he and you please; but'—checking her attempt to speak—'I would like you to know what arrangements I have made to relieve you in the future. I have spoken to Mrs. Vincent, and Janie and Nora shall go to her at Easter—you suggested that yourself'—apologetically, as Clare flushed with surprise; he was half afraid that he had wounded her feelings by encroaching on her maternal privileges.

'Oh, Horace that will be such a relief! Janie is so clever that she will soon be beyond me.'

'I thought I was carrying out your wishes, my dear. Then Mrs. Bowdler has offered to take your district. Dr. Lyall says there must be no going out in bad weather, and irregularity in district visiting never answers.'

'I shall be sorry to give it up,' returned Clare rather sadly; 'but I feel you are right.' And then she added more cheerfully, 'If I have no district and no children's lessons, I can easily do the rest.'

'We will leave that question for the present, until you are stronger. Mrs. Stewart has promised to take the Bible class and the mothers' meetings for six months—that is the time we arranged, but she would be willing to carry them on even longer.'

Clare was silent, but her heart swelled with thankfulness. Now, indeed, her husband was a tower of strength to her.

'Have I done right? Is it all as you wish?' he asked, a little troubled at her silence. But when he saw her face he felt he had no need to ask such a question—the lovely look with which Clare thanked him was a sufficient answer.

CHAPTER XXIX

'I AM A POOR MAN'

'The year's at the spring,
And day's at the morn,
Morning's at seven,
The hillside's dew-pearled;
The lark's on the wing,
The snail's on the thorn,
God's in His Heaven—
All's right with the world.'

ROBERT BROWNING.

'You live but once, so make the best use of your time.

EURIPIDES.

Two or three days after this conversation had passed between the wife and husband, Gerda set out early one afternoon to visit a poor family who had lately been in great trouble. At one time they had been in Mrs. Glyn's district, but the man had found work in another parish, and his wife, an honest respectable woman, had been compelled to break up her little home. She was one of Mrs. Glyn's special favourites, and she had begged Gerda more than once to walk over to Comberley and see how poor Molly was faring.

'I have been thinking of her so much since I have been ill,' she said once. 'I am a happy woman compared to Molly. How much better it is to part with one's children than to have one's heart broken by their misconduct! Molly will never lift up her head again now Joe has been in prison. He has been a ne'er-do-well all his life.'

Gerda had promised to see Molly as soon as possible, but the opportunity had not come until now. It was a good three miles' walk to Comberley, and she had been unwilling to leave the invalid for a whole afternoon. Bessie was engaged with her studies and the care of the little girls, and the Vicar was engrossed with parish work. Mrs. Glyn grew restive at last—a good sign, as her doctor informed her. She began to assert herself, and to contradict her nurse.

'I am quite well enough to be left for a couple of hours,' she said that morning. 'You are looking a little pale, Gerda, and I am quite sure that a walk this fine afternoon will do you good.'

Gerda hesitated. She longed for the walk, but she was not quite sure that she ought to desert her post.

'Uncle Horace is going up to town,' she objected.

'Yes, but he will be back by five—he told me so himself—and Bessie and the children will not leave until four.' For a little friend of the twins had invited the three to a birthday party.

Gerda was very willing to be persuaded. It was a fine afternoon in March. The sky was blue and cloudless, and there was a pleasant briskness in the air. Gerda admired the soft budding green of the hedgerows. 'I suppose the primroses are out in the Park,' she thought, as she paused to listen to a thrush's song; but she sighed a little heavily as she resumed her walk.

All these weeks Gerda had been leading a dual existence. She had nursed her aunt with a devotion that had earned the Vicar's warmest gratitude. Her duties had seemingly engrossed her. But her real life, the absorbing interest that had made each day a joy to her, had been those few minutes when the quiet, keen-eyed doctor had stood beside his patient and had given the demure nurse his orders. How little he had said that was not strictly professional—a remark about the fineness of the weather, an inquiry whether they had heard from Walter, perhaps a message from Pamela. And yet those visits had been stores of comfort to Gerda. There was always something fresh to muse over. Perhaps he had looked kindly at her, he had praised the arrangement of the flowers, he had glanced

round the room approvingly; once he told Mrs. Glyn in her presence that she had a model nurse, and then he had looked across at Gerda with that quick smile of his that always made her heart beat faster.

She did not dare acknowledge, even to herself, how she dreaded the cessation of those daily visits. Dr. Lyall had hinted more than once that his patient would soon do without him. The day before he had announced rather abruptly that he should probably omit the morning visit. Gerda had not ventured to answer, for fear her disappointment should be perceptible. She had awakened that morning with a blank feeling—nothing was going to happen—the day somehow had lost its brightness and meaning. But this was not her only trouble. That very morning she had received letters from her mother and Doris, urging her immediate return.

'Two whole months before your aunt Clare can come to us!' wrote Mrs. Meredith. 'My dear child, surely you do not propose staying away from your home all that time; your aunt Clare is far too unselfish to ask such a thing. Why cannot your uncle Horace bring her himself; or if that be impossible, Bessie could be spared; even Gerard might offer to escort her. Gerard is going up to town on Saturday; he has turned suddenly restless, and says he wants a change. He will be absent two or three weeks—perhaps longer; so you see, dearest, there is not the slightest excuse for remaining away longer; and Doris, poor child, wants you so badly. I spoke to your grandfather just now about it, but he had another twinge of gout, and was a little testy. "She may come home if she likes. I suppose she does not mean to live permanently at St. Jude's Vicarage!" was all his answer; but I concluded from this that he is quite ready for your return; so if next Monday or Tuesday will suit you——'

'Monday or Tuesday!' ejaculated Gerda, when she came to this, 'and it is Thursday now—only five days! Oh no, I cannot leave Aunt Clare so soon as that. I——' And then she took up Doris's note.

It was very brief, and the gist of the whole was that Gerda must come home as soon as possible.

'I really cannot do without you any longer, darling,'

wrote Doris. 'I must strike—I must indeed; it is too utterly deadly, as Maud Hatherley used to say. And, then, Gerard is going up to town—that makes everything so much worse. I could bear your absence with tolerable equanimity when I had Gerard to take me for walks and rides. He has been so good—such a dear! but he has not forgotten you. Oh no, indeed; and I am afraid the remembrance of his failure is still bitter to him. But we get on very well together, and one day he told me that he was very fond of me. Wasn't it kind of him to say that? "You are such a good little soul, Doey," he said—"such an unselfish, dear child, and," glancing at me critically—we were riding down Darley Vale—"you look very nice in your habit." Now, was that not odd for Gerard to say all that? Oh, what rubbish I am writing! but I always do tell you every little thing that pleases me—and I liked Gerard to say that; but the post is going out, and mother is in a fidget, as usual. So good-bye, my own darling, and come back soon to your disconsolate little sister.'

'Poor dear Doris!' sighed Gerda; 'how selfish I am becoming!' But all the same, her heart was heavy within her. Had it come to this—that home meant banishment, exile? Ah, her eyes were open now! One flash of consciousness—of blinding, intense light—and then a long sobbing breath of uncontrollable emotion, and a resolute turning away from a certain thought. 'It is not my fault. How can I help it? Is it wrong to love the highest? He has saved my life. He is a good man. I can trust him wholly. When he is near me, I feel absolutely at rest. I want nothing; I ask nothing: I am content. Surely there is no wrong in this?' She paused, as though she had arrived at a solution satisfactory to herself; but a conscience like Gerda's was not so easily appeased. 'But mother and Doris——' she began again by-and-by: she had paid her visit to Molly; had sat by Molly's clean hearth, listening to a long story about poor Joe; had consoled, cheered, and exhorted to the best of her power.

'My master always said there was a sort of twist about Joe, a kind of warp in his nature,' Molly said, with her apron to her eyes. 'You see, miss, there was that unfortunate fall of mine over neighbour Green's wire fence,

the summer before Joe was born. Perhaps you heard how bad I was. Dr. Brown never thought I could have lived through it. Joe—poor chap!' And here followed one of those minute and realistic descriptions in which women of Molly's class are apt to indulge, and which make the cheeks of youthful district visitors burn hotly. Molly meant no harm, poor soul! It was a grim reality to her, fighting her way with her babe through the shadows of death.

'I was sore feared that my baby would die,' she finished, 'but it seems I have got my wish for naught. I would sooner have laid Joe in his coffin—ah, that I would!—and my master says the same, than have him shame us like this.'

'Perhaps Joe has repented, and will do better soon,' returned Gerda, taking the hard, work-worn hand in hers, and pressing it gently. 'Now I must go, and I dare not promise to come and see you again, as I am going home soon;' and then, as she closed the cottage-door behind her, the uneasy voice within her had made itself heard again.

'Selfishness must be wrong, and it is selfish not to want to go home to mother and Doris,' she thought. 'One ought always to want one's home people, and yet—and yet——' Gerda got no farther than this. In spite of conscience, in spite of the promptings of an affectionate nature, the claims of that imperious guest who knocks so loudly, so imperatively, at women's hearts—ay, and at men's hearts too, and will not be denied admittance—was clamouring at the girlish citadel which Gerda was so feebly defending.

'Just a corner, just a seat by your hearth that no one else wants,' is the deceptive pleading. 'Call me Friendship—anything you like; clothe me in any venerable or youthful garb: only let me sit awhile.' Ah, well, she had yielded! What was Love, the humble suppliant, doing now? Truly, he had been right busy. Not a corner, but each room—the whole house—was under his sway. The young mistress could no longer shut him out.

Gerda was so absorbed by this self-argument that she was quite unconscious that for the last five minutes footsteps were behind her. Some one, who had watched her leave Molly's cottage, was quietly following her.

'What a fluke!' were Dr. Lyall's words, as he had

caught sight of the gray gown. A fluke indeed! one of those curious coincidences which happen at times! Dr. Lyall had no patient in Comberley, but a friend had asked him to call when he had a leisure half-hour. The friend had been engaged—a whole bevy of visitors—and he had taken his leave very quickly. When he saw Gerda, he made up his mind what to do. A walk was just what he wanted. He would send the brougham home; he gave the instructions to his coachman, loitered under pretext of reading a letter until the man was out of sight, and then walked on swiftly down the long country road until he came up with her.

'Miss Meredith!'

Ah, she was startled indeed—so startled that the fresh colour that exercise had brought to her cheeks quite faded away.

'You here?' she said tremulously; for of all strange things this was the strangest.

He took the matter very coolly; he must have been blind not to see her obvious discomposure at the sight of him. He had taken her too much by surprise, and yet not for worlds would he have missed this.

'Shall we walk on?' he continued, as though anxious to give a matter-of-course air to the meeting. 'I saw you coming out of that low white cottage by the wheelwright's; and as our roads lay together for awhile, I thought I might be permitted to join you.'

'I did not know that you had patients at Comberley,' she said, trying hard to feel at her ease.

'Neither have I,' he returned; 'but some friends of mine—the Fenwicks—live at Mitre Lodge, and I have long owed them a visit. Need we walk so fast, Miss Meredith? Are you in any hurry?' Then, as she slackened her pace, he observed nonchalantly: 'What a delightful afternoon! There is just a touch of east in the wind, but it is not cold. March is more lamblike than usual this year.'

'I do love the spring,' observed Gerda.

Now, what was there in such a simple speech to bring about a declaration of love? All girls love spring. There was nothing extraordinary in Gerda's quiet statement; but she glanced at Dr. Lyall as she spoke, and that shy, sweet

look drove the doctor's prudence to the winds in a moment. He saw his opportunity, and seized it.

'Yes, I saw you coming out of the cottage,' he resumed boldly, 'and I sent the brougham away, and followed you. One can never get you alone for a moment at the Vicarage, and I wanted to talk to you, and to tell you a little about myself;' and here he paused, perhaps to take breath.

'Yes.'

Gerda could hardly say less. A monosyllabic reply is not the most gracious form of utterance; but speech was difficult to her that moment. Dr. Lyall's abruptness, the emphasis laid on the last words, 'I wanted to talk to you, and to tell you a little about myself,' made any other answer impossible.

'May I venture to hope that it will interest you?' he continued, with renewed animation. 'I am a poor man, Miss Meredith—comparatively poor, I mean. Circumstances have been somewhat against me, and one must have time to achieve professional success. It will be uphill work with me for some years, and perhaps I may never be a rich man; and yet—and yet—though I know this, I dare to tell you that I love you dearly, and that it is my greatest wish and longing to win your love in return.'

She had known it was coming; the sympathy between them was too perfect for her to mistake his meaning. Of course she had known that he had followed her purposely: when she had walked on faster and he had gently checked her, it was because her instinct told her that the supreme crisis of her life had come. At such moments a woman's happiness is largely tempered by fear. She longed yet dreaded to hear his next words. When they came—a frank, manly confession—that his heart was hers, her calmness surprised herself.

'Would it make you happy?' she returned, in a low voice.

'It would make me supremely happy, Gerda!'—stopping her impetuously, and taking her hands—'there is no one near us; we are absolutely alone this moment. Tell me truthfully, could you put up with such a poor plain life for my sake?'

'For your sake,' she answered slowly, but her eyes were

fixed on the stones at her feet, 'I would put up with a far poorer life.'

'Thank you!' but she missed the flash of joy in his eyes as he dropped her hands, and they walked on again in blissful silence.

They were not absolutely alone now. A cart was slowly climbing up the hill, and some labourers, returning from work, had just come in sight; in a few more minutes they would have reached the cross-roads. He had meant to have turned off there and leave her. His intention had been to strike off in the direction of Hexham Down, and so reach his own home by a circuitous route; he had had no wish to walk with her through Cromehurst. A few minutes' conversation was all he had expected, but now—now—lifting up his head high with joyful pride, he would go to the very door of the Vicarage with her. Was she not his—his own property? Oh, the simplicity and beauty of this girlish nature! With what grace, with what womanly dignity, she had given herself to him. 'For your sake I would put up with a far poorer life!'—words to be stamped on his memory for ever.

It was a long time before the silence between them was broken. They had passed the labourers, and were now in a more populated part; they were passing the house where Hester's little pupil had lain dying when Dr. Lyall spoke again. There was a new tone in his voice, a quiet air of possession, as he asked her if she were tired.

'Oh no, not at all tired.'

'I must take the blame of your paleness, then. Perhaps I ought not to have spoken so abruptly; but the opportunity was too good, and I could not help myself. Was I wrong, dearest?'—dropping his voice. 'Ought I to have spoken to Sir Godfrey or your mother first? I think I meant to do so. I have begun a letter to Sir Godfrey, but I had no courage to finish it. I felt I must find out first what chance there was for me. How could I tell what answer you might have for me?'

'No, you were not wrong.'

'I am thankful to hear that, but I am afraid your people will not endorse that opinion. Do you know, I had a desire to make Mrs. Glyn my confidante, but her illness prevented

it. Will you help me with your mother? Of course I will write to Sir Godfrey at once. You would wish me to do that?'—turning to her quickly.

'Oh yes,' she returned, with a sigh. By-and-by, when she had courage for it, she must tell him about Gerard, and about her grandfather's wishes, but not now—nothing must spoil this first hour. 'Grand will not be pleased,' she continued, rather sadly; 'he is ambitious, he thinks it wrong to be poor. You know'—stammering slightly—'that I am poor, too.'

'I am glad to hear it;' and he really meant what he said.

Dr. Lyall was too proud a man to wish to owe anything to the woman he married. He was quite aware that the sisters were portionless. Mrs. Hake had informed him once quite casually in conversation that both Gerda and Doris were dependent on their grandfather's goodwill. 'Gerard Hamlyn will have most of the money. He is a good fellow, and his great-uncle is devoted to him.'

'I do not think either of us are mercenary,' he went on; 'and yet, for your sake, dear, I trust I shall not always be poor. I shall be covetous of riches now. After all, I have told you nothing about myself, and yet I want you to know everything—it is your right. One thing I must ask you—you would not wish me to do less for Hester?'

'I wish you——Oh, Dr. Lyall!'

Then he shook his head at her with a smile.

'Dr. Lyall will have to be Alick now. Do you like my old-fashioned name, Gerda?'

'Oh, so much!' But she added shyly: 'You will have to wait until I get used to you.'

'Do not keep me too long waiting, then. Do you remember that dinner-party at the Hakes', and our talk about names? How cold and distant you were at first, and then how sweetly and humbly you made your apology! I believe I fell in love with you then.'

'Did you?'

'Did I! What a curt answer! But you will talk more to me by-and-by. Ah, there is the Vicarage! Are you going to ask me in, or shall I come up of my own accord?'

Then she laughed a little nervously, and ran up the steps, and he followed her closely.

'Is Aunt Clare still in the study?' she asked, as the servant admitted them.

'Yes, miss; and master is there, too. He came in ten minutes ago.'

'Why need we disturb them?' whispered Dr. Lyall as Susan retreated; 'you can go to them presently, but I have not seen you yet. Let me help you off with that warm jacket, and the hat—will you take off that, too?' and as she obeyed him, he put his hands gently on her shoulders. 'Let me look at you in your new character,' he said tenderly, and then he drew her closer and kissed her.

'Aunt Clare will want her tea,' she pleaded, when they had talked a little together. 'Will you spare me for a moment while I take her a cup?'

'Do not be long,' he returned pleadingly. 'I shall have to go away soon. Gerda, you will write to your mother to-night, will you not? Our letters must go by the same post. Then there is Mrs. Glyn. I think she ought to know how things are between us. And Hester—of course I must tell Hester.'

'But not yet—not until we have heard from mother and Grand.' Oh, the sweetness of that 'we' to her lover's ears. 'I think it would be better to wait a little.'

'Hester will find it out for herself. She is very sharp. She will guess something directly she sees me. Must you go? Is that tea ready?' and he opened the door so grudgingly that Gerda laughed her old silvery laugh.

'Dr. Lyall is in the drawing-room, Uncle Horace,' she said very demurely, as she set down the little tray by the couch. I am going to give him some tea directly. He asked after you, Aunt Clare, but he thinks it will be better to see you to-morrow morning.'

'Dr. Lyall here!' observed Mrs. Glyn in surprise. 'I thought he was not to come to-day. I am sure he said so. If he be here, perhaps I ought to see him. Horace, will you tell him so? I must really give him a hint that these daily visits are no longer necessary.'

'I should leave that to him, my dear. I shall grudge him nothing, if he only makes a woman of you again. She really looks better, does she not, nurse?' a name he often jokingly used. 'But come, we must not keep the doctor waiting.'

'When Dr. Lyall has gone, you may come and tell me about Molly,' observed Mrs. Glyn. 'Your walk has done you good, Gerda; you have quite a fine colour.—How very pretty she looks!' was her thought as the girl tripped happily away. 'I have wondered once or twice if Dr. Lyall admires her. But no; he always says he cannot afford to fall in love, and I suppose he knows best.'

CHAPTER XXX

SIR GODFREY RECEIVES A LETTER

'I am not fond of expecting catastrophes, but there are cracks in the world.'—SYDNEY SMITH.

IT is impossible to predict what a day may bring forth. The morning postman, whistling cheerily as he trudges down the long roads, may carry about with him in that harmless-looking bag of his, materials which may cause moral explosion to an entire household. The blue business envelope lies on the master's plate; the master himself, fresh from his bath, well groomed, well shaved, enters the breakfast-room with pleasurable anticipations of hot coffee and devilled kidneys. The letter attracts his eyes. He opens it to find himself on the brink of ruin. Some bank has failed; some speculation has miscarried. But Fate's messenger is still trudging along the roads and is whistling as cheerily as ever.

'Willingly give thyself up to Clotho,' says the old philosopher M. Aurelius Antoninus, 'allowing her to spin thy thread into whatever thing she pleases.' And again, 'Be like the promontory against which the waves continually break, but it stands firm and tames the fury of the water around it.'

Mrs. Meredith was not an intellectual woman. She had never even heard of M. Aurelius Antoninus, and though she was dimly conscious that Clotho was one of the Fates, no philosophical axiom would have soothed her perturbed mind when she became acquainted with the contents of her daughter's letter. She had entered the dining-room that

March morning with the placid cheerfulness that was habitual to her.

'There is a letter from Gerda, mother,' observed Doris eagerly; 'do open it quickly, please—it is to tell us which day we may expect her.'

'I am afraid it must wait until after prayers,' returned her mother, with a longing look at the envelope. 'I hear your grandfather's step outside the door, and he never likes to find us reading our letters'—for Sir Godfrey was as full of whims as a woman, and loved to enforce trifling regulations on his obedient household.

Sir Godfrey was not growing younger; his twinges of gout had become more frequent of late, and his evening naps more prolonged, but he was always at his best in the early morning. He would come down from his valet's hands clean-shaved, and looking a thorough impersonation of an aristocratic old gentleman. The morning duties suited him perfectly; he liked to see the decorous servants file into the room; he loved to read prayers in that sonorous voice of his, and to extend a patriarchal benediction on his servitors. Family worship always soothed him, and, unless his letters contained unsatisfactory news, or Mrs. Meredith's bills were excessive, he would take his breakfast with much enjoyment, discussing general news between whiles about the garden, the farm, or village affairs, or listening to his grand-daughter's blithe chatter.

'What have we here?' he began, lifting the cover while Mrs. Meredith, still restraining her longings, poured out the coffee. 'Fish-cakes and kidneys—humph!—ah, yes. Which will you take, Honoria—and you, Doris?—Put on the cover again, Stephens. I will wait a little.—There is cold game on the sideboard—ah, to be sure! Perhaps a little of that pheasant, but there is no hurry. A business letter!'—fixing his eyeglasses more carefully—'do I know that handwriting? Dear me! the post-mark is Cromehurst. Cromehurst—I have no correspondent at Cromehurst. I am not aware'—opening the envelope rather slowly—'that my son-in-law has ever honoured me with a letter——'

'Oh dear, oh dear!' murmured Mrs. Meredith, who had not heard one word of this. The family seldom listened to Sir Godfrey's rambling remarks; his talk generally mean-

dered like a trickling rivulet. Sir Godfrey loved to descant, expatiate, enlarge, on every passing topic, to carry on a running commentary that needed no answer. 'Oh dear!' sighed the poor woman helplessly. Gerda had certainly not beaten about the bush; her first sentence conveyed all that there was to tell, and as Mrs. Meredith read it, she felt as though some earthquake had brought the roof about her ears.

'Did you speak, my dear?—eh! what—what—what is this—what is he talking about? Alexander Lyall! Why, that is the name of the fellow—doctor, isn't he?—who pulled Gerda out of the lake! Upon my honour, you are coming it very strong, Dr. Lyall! Wants to enter our family, eh!—wants to marry my grand-daughter. There, there'—flinging it across the table with a gesture of disgust—'you are the girl's mother! Just look at that. Did you ever hear such impudence? Thinks himself equal to the Hamlyns, does he? But I will soon prove his mistake to him.' And Sir Godfrey, fuming and fretting, sat glaring at his unhappy daughter.

'I have a letter from Gerda, too,' she began tremulously, but Sir Godfrey only shouted to her to read the letter. His breakfast was spoilt; an unpleasant sensation warned him that he must be careful not to excite himself.

'Read it,' he went on, and Mrs. Meredith was obliged to take up the letter.

Poor Dr. Lyall! That hapless epistle had cost him much labour. He had written more than one copy, and at last, in despair, had sent off a final attempt, which he thought miserably inadequate.

'My dear Sir Godfrey' (he wrote)—'Our acquaintance is a very limited one, and I fear the contents of this note will surprise you, for I am going to ask of you the greatest favour that any man can ask of another man, and I have no excuse to offer for my boldness. I have succeeded in winning the affections of your eldest grand-daughter. I have seen a great deal of Miss Meredith since her arrival at St. Jude's Vicarage, and a mutual sympathy has grown up between us. May I hope that you will not think me presumptuous?'—and thereupon followed a brief but explicit

statement of his affairs, present and prospective. 'I fear, indeed,' he went on, 'that you would prefer a richer man for your grand-daughter, but I hope that in a year or two I may be able to give her the comforts she requires. If you will grant me my request, it shall be the object of my life to make her happy and shield her in every possible way. My dear sir, we love each other. Need I say more? May I entreat you to look favourably on my petition?

'If you desire a personal interview, I will gladly come to Chesterton, and will do anything in my power to meet and carry out your wishes. Miss Meredith is writing to her mother by this post.—Yours very truly,

'ALEXANDER LYALL.'

'It is a very gentlemanly letter,' faltered Mrs. Meredith, 'and he seems thoroughly in earnest; and Gerda says—oh, dear! I am afraid she wishes to marry him—she says they are engaged, and that she is so happy! Let me have the letter, Doris.'

For Doris was shedding tears over it—tears of mingled pity and amazement, that this doctor, with his rough brown moustache and quizzical voice, should be preferred to Gerard—to Gerard! Oh, what would Gerard say?—and so on, in a whirl of futile sympathy and sorrow.

There was certainly no mistake about Gerda's feelings:

'MOTHER DEAR—What will you and Doris say,' she began, 'when I tell you that Dr. Lyall has asked me to marry him, and that I have promised to do so? Yes, we are actually engaged; we were engaged three hours ago. I feel as though I were in a dream! I am so happy that I want to sit down and think over the wonderful thing that has happened to me, but he has begged me to write to you instead. He wants my letter to go with his to Grand, but I have just remembered that you will not receive it until Wednesday morning.

'Dear mother—and you too, Doris—I do want you to be pleased about this. Do try, for my sake; for, indeed, I am so very happy. He is such a good man; I think I know more about his goodness every day; and then he is so clever! Is it not wonderful that he loves me? To me it

is the greatest wonder in the world! You must not mind my saying all this; I think I am a little bit dazed this evening. After all, it has come so suddenly, and of course I long to talk to you both.

'Dear mother, please take my part and his, if Grand be very angry. He will be vexed that Dr. Lyall is not a rich man. Grand thinks so much about money and worldly things, but to me this is nothing. Shall I tell you what he said—his very words? I think I remember them exactly: "Can you put up with a poor, plain life for my sake?" And what do you think I answered him? I felt he must have the truth—the real, unvarnished truth—from my lips: "For your sake"—yes, I actually said that!—"I would put up with a far poorer life." Was it bold of me to say that? I do not think so. I felt I owed it to him.

'Now, darling mother, do your best for me. Let Grand know that I have given Dr. Lyall my word, and that nothing on earth will induce me to take it back—that I belong to him now. I am not in the least afraid that you will withhold your consent. I know you care only to see your children happy. When you know Dr. Lyall better, you will care for him too, and you will forget any other wishes that you may have formed. Poor dear Gerard! But I was right to refuse him—I am quite sure of that now. Ask Doris to write to me.—Your loving daughter,

'GERDA.'

'Will you put down that letter and attend to me, Honoria?' demanded Sir Godfrey angrily. 'What have you got to say about the fellow's insolence? Gerda says—pooh! who cares what the child says?—a heartless little minx who has thrown over the finest young fellow in the world.'

'Father,' remonstrated Mrs. Meredith feebly, 'I think if we waited a little it would be better,' looking apprehensively at Doris, who was making a vain attempt to drink her coffee with the tears running into the cup.

Poor, soft-hearted Doris! torn to pieces with disappointment and dismay for Gerard, and yet secretly exultant at Gerda's happiness.

'How can she—how can she prefer him to Gerard?' she

thought, with a sudden pang at the idea of Gerard's perfections.

'Doris,' snapped Sir Godfrey, 'if you are only playing with your breakfast, perhaps you will be kind enough to leave me with your mother;' and Doris was thankful to obey him, but she managed to whisper in her mother's ear as she passed:

'Grand must not separate them. Do all you can for poor Gerda.'

'I do not think you ought to be angry with Dr. Lyall, father,' observed his daughter timidly, as her supporter withdrew. 'He may not be rich, but he is a gentleman.'

But this mild remark brought down a torrent of wrath on her devoted head.

'Are you such a fool, Honoria, as to think a beggarly apothecary a desirable son-in-law? Have you no more pride than that? Are you aware that Dr. Lyall's sister—yes, actually his sister—keeps a little day-school? Why, Hake told me that himself, and the fellow pays for her brats' schooling.' Sir Godfrey seldom measured his words when he was in a rage, and then he settled down in a white heat. 'Look here! I am just going to write to Dr. Lyall and civilly decline the honour he proposes to do us. Oh, I will be civil. I have other views—we have other views—for my grand-daughter. I will tell him that it is not in my power to grant him this favour, and so on, and then you can write to the girl.'

'And what am I to tell her?'

'Tell her! Do you want me to dictate the very words, and you her mother! For shame, Honoria! You are no better than a child yourself. Tell her to forget all this rubbish, and to come home at once. Make her understand'—with a certain threatening intonation in his voice—'that she must at once cancel this precious engagement of hers—that she must give up the fellow, or——'

'Or?' queried Mrs. Meredith, cowed for the moment by the anger in the old man's eyes. 'Surely you do not wish me to say any more than that?'

But this faint opposition only fanned the smouldering embers of his wrath afresh.

'But I do!' he retorted fiercely. 'Tell her from me—

from me, who have fed and clothed her all her life, and whose benefits she has repaid with such base ingratitude—tell her that until she has repented of her folly, and has promised to think no more of the man, the Hall shall no longer be her home—she may stop with Clare. There, you may tell her that!'

'I will do nothing of the kind,' returned Mrs. Meredith, roused to real opposition by this. Even a worm will turn, and the weakest woman will simulate courage for the sake of her children. 'Father, you have no right to be so hard and tyrannical. Dr. Lyall may not be a good match—I would myself have preferred Gerard a hundred times—but there is no need to treat him with contempt. If he has fallen in love with her, it is surely no crime that he should wish to marry her.'

'Why did he not come and ask my consent first?' retorted Sir Godfrey. 'In our class we do not approve of clandestine love-making. The girl must have encouraged him, and, no doubt, Clare and that precious husband of hers are at the bottom of the mischief. It is a conspiracy to thwart and vex me. No, madam!'—lashing himself up to fresh fury—'if you cannot keep your children in better order, you must suffer for it as well as they. Until the girl promises to give the doctor fellow up, she shall not come here.'

'Then I will go to her,' and Mrs. Meredith faced round upon the old man with a resolution and dignity that took him by surprise. Once before had she held her own with him—once before she had thrown off the yoke of his tyranny, when he had insulted her widowhood; and now she had taken up arms in defence of her child.

'If you banish Gerda you banish me,' she said, and there was no faltering in her voice. 'Father, you demand too much; flesh and blood cannot bear it. No mother would consent to be parted from her child for such a cause. I have only two—they are dear good children! They are my Algy's children;' and then her brief wrath evaporated, and she rocked herself gently to and fro and wept.

'Pooh! stuff and nonsense? Who is talking of Algy?' returned Sir Godfrey impatiently. But he spoke with less assurance. He had not expected her to turn upon him like this. Honoria was such a poor thing, such a mild, sub-

missive slave to his whims, that he had never doubted that his word would be law to her, and her assumption of maternal rights had rather astonished him. 'What has Algy got to do with it? Do you mean to tell me that, after a lifetime spent under my roof, you—you will thwart me too?'

The angry sorrow in Sir Godfrey's voice went to his daughter's heart. After all, he had shielded her forlorn widowhood, and in his own way he had been a father to her girls.

'No,' she returned gently, 'I have no wish to thwart you. But I cannot consent to treat Gerda unkindly. If you will not have her here I will go to Cromehurst. Clare will take me in, and you will not miss me for a week or two. I must talk to Gerda; I must see for myself how far her happiness depends on this marriage. Gerda is one-and-twenty. She is old enough to judge for herself. Neither you nor I have a right to forbid this marriage.'

'There I differ from you,' he replied wrathfully, 'and I can and will forbid it. Is not one mésalliance in our family enough? I shall write my letter at once to Dr. Lyall, and I shall tell him that I must refuse his flattering proposal. If he marries Gerda he will marry a beggar, and I will never see either of them again.' And Sir Godfrey straightened his old back and held his head high, and marched out of the room, leaving his weeping daughter with the relics of a doubtful victory round her. Doris soon crept in to console her mother.

'Don't fret, mammie dear,' she said, winding her arms round the widow's neck. 'Grand is in an awful rage, but he will soon get over it; and, after all, Gerda is your child, not his.'

'I will never be separated from my children,' sobbed the poor woman hysterically. 'All these years I have tried to do my duty to your grandfather; but there are limits even to duty. When it comes to choosing between my father and my children, do you think I should hesitate?'

'No, mammie dear, of course not. And now do please dry your poor eyes, and let us talk comfortably. You must go to Cromehurst and talk to Gerda, and then you must write and tell me everything she says. Oh, if I could only come too!'

'My dear, it would be impossible. Gerard is away, and if your grandfather should have one of his attacks of gout——'

And then Doris sorrowfully agreed with her mother.

'And you will be good to her,' she continued when they had talked a little more. 'At first I was so sorry for Gerard that I could not think about anything else. But, mother dear, if Gerda really loves Dr. Lyall, you will try to like him too?'

'I shall be sure to do that, Doris. As far as I remember, I thought him very pleasing. And, then, he saved Gerda's life; after that, how can I be hard to him?'

'But all the same, I did not want him for my brother-in-law, and I am not sure that I want him now. I think'—reflectively—'that I am a little afraid of him. He says clever, sarcastic things in a quiet way; and then, if Gerda marries him, she will be so dreadfully poor. How will she manage, mother? She knows nothing about housekeeping, and bills, and money;' and Doris's round face looked puckered and miserable. But her mother had no comfort to suggest.

When Doris had been called away, Mrs. Meredith went up to her own room and wrote a letter to her child—a motherly, tender, helpless sort of letter, that made Gerda sigh.

'Oh, my dear,' she wrote, after a few sentences expressing her own and Doris's astonishment at the news, 'your poor grandfather is in a terrible state of anger. He will have it that Dr. Lyall has behaved badly in not speaking to us first; and, indeed, it would have been far wiser if he had done so. Young people are so different nowadays; they are so much more independent and outspoken than when Clare and I were young. To be sure, Clare had her own way, but Horace spoke to your grandfather first. My darling, are you sure that you have been prudent? If you had only waited a little before you gave Dr. Lyall an answer! Marriage is such an awful responsibility. When a woman marries, she is taking a yoke for her whole life. Do you not remember, dearest, that I blamed you for over-haste in refusing poor Gerard? And now you have already promised yourself to another man. This is what has angered

your grandfather. He declares, until you give up this folly, that he will not have you at the Hall; and, indeed, I do not see how we could eat our bread together in any comfort. But, darling, if your grandfather forsakes you, you have still your mother. No lover shall be a barrier between me and my girls. I am coming up to Cromehurst, and then we can talk about this. For the last year I have longed to see your aunt Clare, and this is my opportunity. Your grandfather is writing to Dr. Lyall at this moment. I greatly fear the letter will be a hard one; perhaps, under the circumstances, I will send him no message. Let him know that I bear him no ill-will; but, all the same, if it had only been Gerard!—Gerard is like my own son, and I love him dearly. Dr. Lyall is a stranger to me, and yet you tell me that you are engaged to him.'

'May I see that letter?' asked Dr. Lyall, as he came in that morning. He found his sweetheart sitting disconsolately by the fire. They had been engaged three days now, and Gerda had become accustomed already to his quiet greeting. As he looked in her face a moment, the shadow in her eyes was distinctly visible to him. 'Shall we exchange letters?' he asked with a smile. And Gerda, with some reluctance, put her mother's letter into his hand.

'You do not want me to read this,' he observed, as he detained her hand, for he understood her perfectly.

'I am so afraid it may hurt you,' she returned apologetically. 'Mother does not mean to be unkind—she is never unkind—but she is so upset about all this, and Grand has been worrying her. She thinks I have been in too great a hurry—that I should have waited a little. Mother is a little vague, and—and——' And here Gerda faltered and grew embarrassed; for, after all, her real reluctance was not so much for this part of the letter. If only her mother had not mentioned Gerard!

'If you do not wish me to read it, I will give it back to you unread,' he said, a little gravely; 'but I hoped that you would have allowed me to share your trouble. Of course I see that you are worried. I can read your thoughts quite easily.'

Then, blushing hotly, she put the letter back into his hand.

'Ah!' with a slight change of tone, as he reached a certain paragraph. 'So Mr. Hamlyn is the favoured suitor?' and then he gently turned her face round, and made her look at him, though it was difficult for Gerda to meet that quietly amused glance. 'Am I to ask the meaning of all this, Gerda, or am I to understand without any telling?'

'I always meant to tell you,' she returned in a low voice; 'but it was so difficult to begin the subject. I was so dreadfully unhappy about it; and even now I cannot bear to think of it.' Then he pressed her hand.

'You need not trouble to tell me. I was only teazing you, because you looked so shy. I know all about it, darling—you refused him the night of the dance. Do you remember my finding you in the morning-room? I understood all about it then.'

'Did you?' in a whisper. 'Poor Gerard!'

'Poor Gerard indeed! How could you have the heart to say "No" to him? When I think of the contrast between us, and between his circumstances and mine, I do not wonder at your mother's preference.' And then he finished the letter.

CHAPTER XXXI

'DO YOU CALL HIM ALICK?'

'I love her with a love as still
As a broad river's peaceful might,
Which, by high tower and lonely mill,
Goes wandering at its own will,
And yet doth ever flow aright.
And on its full, deep breast serene,
Like quiet isles, my duties lie;
It flows around them and between,
And makes them fresh and fair and green,
Sweet homes in which to live and die.'

LOWELL.

AFTER this, Sir Godfrey's letter was read.

Probably that outpouring of wrath to his daughter had acted as a safety-valve, for when Sir Godfrey had seated himself at his writing-table, and had drawn his blotting-pad towards him, the fierceness of his anger had somewhat evaporated.

Certainly, there was no fault to find with the letter. It was perfectly courteous, and, in spite of the formality of the sentences, it was by no means ungracious. The refusal to entertain the idea of Dr. Lyall as a suitor for his grand-daughter was given very civilly.

Sir Godfrey regretted—very much regretted—that he was unable to meet Dr. Lyall's views, and that his very flattering offer must be declined. He begged to thank him extremely for the honour he had done them, but he had other intentions regarding his grand-daughter; and he must add that his daughter, Mrs. Meredith, was of the same mind

with himself. A family alliance had already been projected, but it was hardly necessary to mention that at present: under any circumstances—'any circumstances' fiercely underlined—Dr. Lyall's proposal could not be entertained for a moment. He was sorry to speak so decidedly, but truth was best, and prevented mistakes in future. He had no wish to hurt his feelings, but he must point out very distinctly that, in his opinion, Dr. Lyall's pecuniary resources hardly warranted his aspiring to his grand-daughter. His grand-daughters had been his dearest care. They had been brought up under his own eye, and were too delicately nurtured to be fit for such a position. A medical man just beginning practice could certainly not provide luxuries for his wife, and so on, in Sir Godfrey's verbose style.

'Well, dearest,' as Gerda laid down the letter, 'you see that Sir Godfrey refuses his consent?'

'Yes; and I am not surprised. Grand is very worldly. He has told us over and over again that we must marry rich men. All my life I have been taught that.'

'But all the same you do not seem to have learnt your lesson. Gerda, what are we to do? I am afraid that Sir Godfrey is right, and I cannot give my wife luxuries. Can she do without them?'—looking at her wistfully.

'I thought that I answered that question once before,' was her reproachful answer.

'Yes, darling; but if I crave for some further assurance?'

Then she looked at him in her quiet, serious way.

'Grand has been very good to us,' she said simply, 'and Doris and I have had all we wanted. But it will not trouble me to go without things. My one fear—may I tell you what I fear?' And as he smiled and waited, she went on. 'I have never managed things or kept house, and I am afraid I hardly know the value of money. If I were to be a hindrance and not a help——' very anxiously, but he only smiled again.

'I think you will make a better housekeeper than Pamela; and you can learn—Mrs. Glyn would teach you. I do not think I am at all afraid. But, Gerda, about this letter? What are we to do, if your grandfather will not listen to reason? Shall I go down to Chesterton, and insist on having an interview? or shall we wait until your mother comes?'

'I think it will be best to wait for mother,' she returned. 'Grand must have time to get used to the idea; and after all,' drawing herself up with dignity, 'I am of age.'

'Does that mean that you will not give me up?'

'Most certainly it does! Why should I give you up?'

'Ah, why, indeed? But I could not let you go,' looking at her with proud tenderness. 'I must keep you, in spite of all the Sir Godfreys in the world. Gerda, I believe I am bewitched. Where you are concerned, I am unreasonable. Now I must go, for my patients are waiting. Do you think Mrs. Glyn will let me come in this evening?' And, as Gerda was quite sure of this, he took his leave.

'As though anyone—anyone could make me give him up!' thought Gerda, as she sat down to her embroidery. And there was a brightness in her eyes, and a soft colour in her face, as she remembered certain words he had spoken. Had she bewitched him? Had he not rather bewitched her? for in her heart she knew how gladly she would leave her beautiful home for any home of his, however humble it might be. What were Chesterton Hall, and the traditions of the Hamlyns, and a doating, irascible grandfather, compared with this man's love?

Dr. Lyall's mind was a little disturbed as he got into his brougham. After all, Sir Godfrey's letter was a bitter pill for a proud man to swallow, and in spite of his philosophy he felt himself somewhat hurt.

'There was no need for such a positive refusal,' he thought. 'Gerda is no heiress—as far as I know, she has not a penny; and of course my practice will increase, if I only keep my health.' And then he looked a little grave. 'I can certainly make no settlement on my wife. My insurance policy is all that I can offer, but most men take this risk. As for equality, my family is as old as his, though we have no titles or land; but the Lyalls come of a good old stock—I mean, in Sir Godfrey's opinion. On my mother's side we had a wild Borderer or two, who carried off his enemy's cattle. Why, I could prove to him that an ancestor of mine fell on Flodden Field. I wonder what the old man would say to that! We are no counter-jumpers; not a Lyall that I remember has ever been in

trade. But he is such an obstinate old buffer, that I am afraid this will make no difference.

'If I were only sure that I have not been guilty of rank selfishness in winning my darling's affections; and yet—no, I will not believe that: she was not happy, not quite happy. Somehow her environment hardly satisfied her. She wanted more, she wanted what only I could give her. From the first she appealed to me, she sought my advice. I have thought it out very carefully. She will be happy with me, however little I can give her—happier than if I let her go. And as for me'—here Dr. Lyall's eyes softened —'it is rest only to be near her. She is so different from other girls of her age; there is such repose and gentleness about her. I have heard her spoken of as dreamy and absent—Mrs. Hake said that Doris was her favourite—but she is never absent with me. She does not always talk much, because she is still a little shy with me; but no one can talk better when she is in the mood.' And then, as the brougham stopped, he broke off his lover-like reflections.

'Has your friend gone?' asked Mrs. Glyn, entering the room cautiously. 'Jane told me he was here.'

'Yes; he did not stay long, but he is coming again this evening. I told him that I was sure you would not mind.'

'On the contrary, I shall be delighted, and so will your uncle Horace. He declared to me this morning that this engagement has done me a world of good. What do you think of that?'—settling herself comfortably on the couch.

'I am glad to hear it,' was Gerda's decisive answer, and it was true Mrs. Glyn looked certainly better. She had been intensely surprised at the news of her niece's engagement to Dr. Lyall; indeed, for the first moment the intelligence had almost taken her breath away, but, all the same, she had been immensely charmed. Mr. Glyn had joined them at that moment, and though the conversation had abruptly ceased on his entrance, he saw at once, by the excited look on his wife's face, that something had happened.

'What is it, Clare?' he asked, a little suspiciously, for he observed every change of expression now; indeed, his lynx like vigilance and peremptory guardianship over the

invalid were at times almost trying. 'You are looking feverish, my dear.'

'May I tell him, Gerda? Oh, please let me tell him.'

But, after all, she did not wait for permission, and Mr. Glyn was immensely surprised and pleased too. If his congratulations were rather solemn, they were at least sincere.

'You are very fortunate,' he said. 'I think highly of Lyall. He is an excellent fellow.'

'I am so glad you like him, Uncle Horace.'

'Who could help liking him? Your aunt is devoted to him. He is thoroughly true. One cannot say that of every man.'

'Yes, and think, Horace, what it will be to me to have Gerda near me! Of course, my father and Honoria will not be pleased. They had other plans—eh, Gerda?'

And then Mr. Glyn had delivered a little homily. He rejoiced, so he began, to find there was one girl in the world who could be true to herself, who had sufficient greatness of mind to despise the advantages of wealth and station, who could value a man for himself, and not for his environment. 'Your aunt has set you the example, my dear,' he said, with a benignant look. 'She gave up even more for my sake than you will have to give up for Lyall. Lyall is not such a poor man, though his people hamper him; and in respect of family the Lyalls are unquestionably respectable. They have good Scotch blood in their veins.'

At the word 'family,' Clare had slightly winced. At such moments Sam Harding and the place in Fleet Street always came into her mind.

Gerda settled her aunt comfortably for the morning, and then she took up her embroidery again. Clare looked at her with amused eyes.

'Do you call him Alick yet?'

'Certainly not,' returned Gerda, with a furious blush. 'He will not expect it.'

'Ah, well, it will come naturally some day. I remember Horace made me begin at once; he was an autocrat even then. I had a little talk with your friend last night when you went out of the room to speak to Mrs. Gardiner. He was rather confidential, and told me that he did not approve of a long engagement for a doctor.'

'Why not, Aunt Clare? A doctor is not different from other men.'

'Oh yes, he is. You will find that out for yourself some day. Other men are not so much at the beck and call of their fellow-creatures. A doctor's domestic life is more hampered, and, as a rule, he is hardly ever at leisure.'

'Of course I shall expect him to be busy.'

'He will keep you busy too; but I am not speaking of married life: you will have to discover all that for yourself. When Dr. Lyall—shall I have to call him Alick, too, when he is my nephew?—but we will leave that an open question—when he spoke of his dislike to long engagements, he explained that he was only thinking of doctors. "It does not do for a doctor to be too much engrossed with his own affairs, or his patients will find it out"—those were his very words; and then he told me that he should wish to be married as soon as possible.'

'He has told me nothing of the kind'—in a distressed voice.

'No; he was afraid to scare you too soon; besides, I told him you had a passion for long engagements, and that Jacob and Rachel were your ideal lovers. You should have seen his face when I said that! He fairly squirmed, as the Yankees say. "I am afraid I do not agree on that point," he remarked gravely. "I must have a talk with her." So now I warn you. Is that letter from your mother?'—with a sudden change of voice.

'Yes, we have both had letters. Grand will not hear of our engagement. His letter to Dr. Lyall was very polite, but it was very decided. But should you like to see what mother says?' and then she laid the envelope in Mrs. Glyn's lap.

'Poor dear Honoria! What a life he leads her!' she observed as she folded the letter. 'After all, Gerda, I am not sure that I shall go to Chesterton.'

'Not go to Chesterton?'—in an alarmed tone.

'My dear, just consider what sort of reception I am likely to get, and remember my nerves are not very strong just now. If my father be in this mood he will probably lay all the mischief at my door'—which was just what Sir Godfrey had done. 'He will pretend, until he believes it

himself, that Horace and I have brought about this match to spite him. After all, Gerda, I think it will be safer to go to Brighton with Emma.'

'But Mrs. Harding is such an uncongenial companion.'

'Yes, she is uncongenial; I will not deny that; but in her way she is kind-hearted; she will take every possible care of me, for Horace's sake. I shall have the best of everything, and plenty of it. If I prefer champagne to sauterne, Sam will order it at once, and so it will be with everything.'

'And yet, in spite of the champagne, you will be miserable?'

'No, not miserable. I shall not allow myself to be miserable; but it will certainly not be happiness. One is never happy when one is rubbed up the wrong way all day long.'

'Does Mrs. Harding do that?'

'Yes; but she means it for my good. She will admonish and advise me from morning to night, and her manner will be such an absurd caricature of Horace's that I shall long to throw things at her from pure irritability. Emma always says I have such an ill-regulated mind; and then there will be Sam!'

'Certainly Mr. Harding is not prepossessing.'

'Not in our eyes; but in Emma's he is altogether lovely. I do believe she has invested that shabby little man with every imaginable virtue. I do hate to see them together. Emma is rather a good-looking woman, and then, with all her faults, she is Horace's sister; but Sam is odious. The very way he rubs his hands together angers me. Don't you dislike the friction of hands that are rough or chapped? Sam's hands are always chapped—as a boy he suffered from chilblains; and then there is his laugh—such a silly, heckling sort of laugh!'

'Aunt Clare, you shall certainly not go to Brighton.'

'Indeed, I am not sure where I shall go. Suppose we wait until your mother comes? But there is one point on which I am certain, that even Sam's heckling laugh will be easier to bear than my father's black looks;' and then she sighed and changed the subject.

Gerda had a visitor that afternoon.

It had become Mrs. Glyn's habit since her illness to retire

after luncheon to her husband's study. She was not strong enough for the fatigue of entertaining callers, and this duty devolved on Gerda. Bessie had her French and drawing classes, and the supervision of her little sisters.

It was towards dusk when the door-bell rang, and the next moment Pamela entered. She had opened and closed the door so quietly, her movements were so unlike Pamela's comet-like flashes, that Gerda looked at her in surprise. Her dress was more sombre than usual, and there were no touches of red about her, none of those startling colour effects in which Pamela delighted.

'Well?' she observed abruptly, as she stood within two paces of Gerda; but she offered no other greeting.

'My dear Pamela, is there anything the matter?'

'That is what I have come to ask you.'

'To ask me! How dreadfully solemn you look! You quite frighten me. Do sit down, please. It is so uncomfortable, staring at each other in this way.'

'I feel solemn,' returned Pamela aggressively. 'It is a very solemn occasion.' Then she sat down and wrinkled her brows, and the corners of her mouth went down in a lachrymose fashion. 'So you and Alick have settled things?'

Gerda started.

'Do you mean that your brother has told you?' she said, rather bewildered by this. 'He promised me that he would not tell anyone just yet.'

'So it is true?' returned Pamela, with just a gleam of mischief in her eyes, though her voice was still lugubrious. 'I was quite sure of it myself, only one likes to be positive about things. No, you need not look so astonished. Alick has told me nothing. I am not in his confidence.'

'Then how did you know?'

But this very natural question seemed to exasperate Pamela. Certainly, her temper was in fault this afternoon.

'How do I know?' disdainfully. 'Am I blind, or deaf, or stupid? Have I no eyes, no perception? Do you think I could sit opposite to Alick for three days, and look at his absurdly happy face, and not guess what had happened. I was "cocksure" of it, as Walter says.'

'Ah, I see!'

'Anyone could see who was not a baby or an idiot. There he sat, smiling at nothing, or making little jokes that fell quite flat because I refused to laugh at them. Then he was so affectionate. It was, "Pam dear, do this for me," until I was so aggravated that I could hardly sit still. I suppose,' jerking out the words defiantly, 'that Hester has already paid you a visit of congratulation?'

'My dear Pamela, Hester knows nothing about it. I begged Dr.—I mean your brother—to keep our engagement a secret from everyone until we had heard from my mother and Grand.'

Then a wonderful transformation passed over Pamela; a cloud seemed to roll off her, and her mouth ceased to droop at the corners.

'Do you mean that he has not told Hester?'

'Certainly I mean it. Do you think he would tell one sister and not both? Oh, Pamela, how naughty you are!' for Pamela's eyes were suddenly full of tears. 'Is this why you are so cross with me? I was afraid—I really was afraid that our engagement vexed you. Are you not pleased,' she continued coaxingly, 'that one day we shall be sisters?'

'I am not sure that I want a sister,' returned Pamela obstinately. 'If I must have one, I would rather have you, of course. Just fancy if Alick had fallen in love with Jessie Brown! I was once terribly afraid of that.'

'I think you had no cause for fear,' replied Gerda, in rather a dignified voice; for naturally this speech did not please her.

Then Pamela gave her a sharp glance.

'Of course I had no cause. Alick has never looked at a girl twice, till you and he broke the ice together. Do you remember Captain Hake's joke? Well, now, you need not be touchy; I meant no unkindness. But the fact is, I am not quite sure that I want Alick to get married. I meant to be married myself first.'

'It will make no difference to you, dear,' returned Gerda gently, for she was beginning to understand.

It was no use expecting Pamela to behave in the usual conventional manner; she was too contradictory, too bristling with sensitive prejudices. She would condole with a person when looked to for hearty congratulations, and she had

been known to find occasion for felicitation when paying a visit of condolence to a bereaved family. She had been sternly rebuked for heartlessness by Hester, who had accompanied her, but no impression had been made.

'What is the use of saying you are sorry?' had been her answer. 'Of course, I was sorry enough; but there is always comfort if you dig deep enough, and I was only helping the poor things to dig.'

When Gerda made this soothing little speech, Pamela looked at her rather oddly.

'I do not think that you know what you are talking about,' she said shortly. 'When Alick marries I shall have to find another home, and—and Derrick will not have me.'

'Really, Pamela this is too absurd?' and Gerda looked quite hurt. 'I should have thought you had more sense than to think such a thing! Do you suppose for one moment that we should let you go? Please—please do not think either of us so unkind!'

'But Alick will not want me. Even Derrick says two is company and three none. Indeed, I have heard him say more than once that nothing would induce him to have one of his sisters to live with him when he was married. To be sure, they are two tiresome old maids, and he knows I should not tolerate them.'

'The cases are not in the least similar,' returned Gerda; 'you are much younger than your brother. You poor child! do put this idea out of your head. I have enough to trouble me without this. If I ever—if I ever marry your brother,' blushing beautifully as she spoke, 'I shall try to do all I can for your happiness as well as his. We shall be real sisters, shall we not?' holding out her hand.

And Pamela was vanquished.

'I did not mean to be unkind,' she said, when they had gone through a little scene of reconciliation. 'I have always liked you from the first, and I do want Alick to be happy. You just suit him; he likes quiet, nicely-behaved people; and then he is head-over-ears in love with you. Well, now we have made it up, and I am going to be sweet as honey. You say you have enough to trouble you. Are the home-folk bothering you about Alick?'

'Grand is not at all pleased; he has refused his consent.'

'Grand? Is that the old gentleman with the high nose, who looks as though he were cut out of ivory?'

Then Gerda laughed.

'Sir Godfrey? Oh, I remember! I thought him an old dear. He is such a nice straight-backed old gentleman, and he is always so beautifully groomed, and his hands are lovely; they are like old ivory, too. I do not think I ever saw such nails; they are real filbert nails. What is the matter with the girl? Surely I may praise Sir Godfrey if I like?'

'Yes, of course; but you are so funny, Pamela! I have never noticed Grand's nails. Gerard has a nice hand, too—all the Hamlyns have.'

'Then she sighed and looked grave as she mentioned Gerard's name.

'Gerard is the handsome cousin they all wanted you to marry. I have found that out, too'—with a knowing look—'I always find out everything. Derrick says I should make a splendid detective. Now, my dear, I must really go, for I have to dine at The Boltons to-night. Alick says he has an engagement. Oh, I thought so!' as Gerda half smiled. 'He is very fully engaged, I see. Good-bye, dear. Never mind the old gentleman; just stick to Alick, and he will make you as happy as a queen.' And before Gerda could answer her, she was gone.

CHAPTER XXXII

'HAS ANYTHING HAPPENED?'

'Comparisons spoil impressions, as resemblances spoil faces.'—CARMEN SYLVA.

'The miseries of man's life are all beaten out on his own anvil.'—DEAN SWIFT.

MRS. GLYN still kept her invalid's prerogative of retiring to bed early, and it was Bessie's privilege to wait on her.

Once, indeed, with her customary unselfishness, she had suggested to her husband that it was time for her to exert herself.

'I am getting dreadfully spoilt with all this indulgence!' she observed half playfully and half seriously. 'I shall soon think it a necessity to have a fire in my room and Bessie to brush my hair.'

But Mr. Glyn turned a deaf ear to this.

'I will tell you when I see any danger of self-indulgence,' he returned quietly. 'At present you have only to obey your doctor's orders, and to get strong.' And Clare retired, much comforted. When his wife had left the drawing-room, Mr. Glyn also withdrew to his study, and Gerda and Dr. Lyall were enabled to resume their morning talk; but an interruption soon occurred.

The door-bell rang, and the next minute a tall figure, in a long gray cloak, entered unannounced.

'Hester!' exclaimed her brother, in great surprise.

'You here, Alick?' returned Mrs. Vincent, in much dismay. 'And I am actually intruding on a *tête-à-tête!*

But Pamela has just told me, and I felt I could not sleep until I had seen this dear girl!' And she took Gerda in her arms and kissed her with sisterly tenderness, and then she held out her hand to her brother, and they both saw there were tears in the deep-set eyes.

'Pamela? Oh, the little traitress!' ejaculated Dr. Lyall, for Gerda had just told him about her visit. 'Do you know, you naughty woman, that you have stolen my secret? Why, I actually have not dared to come near you for three days, for fear you should read my face; and now all my precautions have been in vain!'

'I had my suspicions,' returned Hester calmly, as she sat down and regarded them with a beaming face—'you need not think you could deceive me, Alick!—of course I had my suspicions; and then Pamela told me. I was rather cross with her at first, for I would much rather have heard it first from you; and then, as Julius was out, I could not resist the temptation of coming to the Vicarage; and now I see I am not wanted.'

'Oh, please do not talk so!' implored Gerda, rather confused by this. 'Do take off Mrs. Vincent's cloak, and make her comfortable,' she continued, with an entreating look at Dr. Lyall.

But Hester shook her head vigorously, and motioned him away.

'I could not stay. Ray is very restless; and I only want to feast my eyes on you both for a moment. Alick dear, go back to Gerda, and let me see you together, to be sure that I have not dreamt this.' And Dr. Lyall, with an amused look, resumed his seat.

'I suppose I must humour you, Hester; but I warn you that Gerda has feelings. Suppose you turn your attention to me—I am brazen enough for anything. Have I grown taller since? do I look twice the man I was? Bless her dear heart, if she is not actually crying over us!'

'I am so pleased, so glad!' returned Hester in a choking voice. 'Gerda, you do not know what this is to me. All these years I have so longed for him to be happy. He is so good, and he has had such a hard life, and I could do nothing for him; and now—now——' and her pause was sufficiently suggestive.

'I am so glad that you are pleased,' observed Gerda, struggling with her shyness. If only she could be alone with Mrs. Vincent!

Dr. Lyall seemed to understand her thoughts.

'You must not expect her to say much to-night, Essie. You must get her to yourself, and then she will talk fast enough; but at present we are taking our happiness soberly.' And then he told Hester about Sir Godfrey's letter and Mrs. Meredith's proposed visit.

Mrs. Vincent looked rather alarmed.

'Oh, what a pity! But they will not make you give Alick up.'

But Gerda's indignant 'No indeed!' soon set her fears at rest. 'No one could do that,' she continued proudly.

Dr. Lyall reserved his expression of gratitude for a more favourable opportunity. Clearly his sister was in the way just now. He was an ardent lover, and these moments with Gerda were precious. Hester had tact enough to know this. She made one or two more pretty speeches, arranged that Gerda should have tea with her the following afternoon, when there should be no tiresome Alick to spoil everything, and then she took her leave, in spite of all Gerda's protests and entreaties.

'If you had only pressed her to stay, she would not have gone,' she said reproachfully when Dr. Lyall re-entered with a radiant look; 'but you said nothing.'

'I did not want her to stay,' he returned coolly. 'I can see Hester any day I like, and I am sure'—with a mischievous inflection in his voice—'that you would prefer to talk to me.'

But Gerda would not own this.

'Never mind, I shall take it for granted. I don't mean always to let you have your own way. But it was sweet of you to say that, darling? So no one will ever make you give me up? It did me good to hear you say that.'

'How could I say otherwise?' she replied simply. 'You would not give me up either, would you, Alick?' half whispering the word in his ear.

Then he drew her to him with a fond gesture.

'Alick! I never cared for my name before, but I shall now. Was it very difficult to say, dear? It will come

easier with practice. No, I do not believe anything earthly would make me give you up; but I fear I may have to wait for my wife;' and, though Gerda made no response to this, she feared so too.

Gerda went to Daintree House the next afternoon, and spent a happy hour with Hester, and on this occasion she did not stint her confidence; neither did she refuse to talk of her lover, and she listened to Hester's praises of that dearly loved brother with a satisfaction that knew no weariness.

'I always felt he was good. I knew it from the first,' she said softly. 'But you have made me understand him better than ever. I only wish I were more worthy of him.'

But Hester had much to say on this point.

'You will suit him exactly—even Pamela says that. And, Gerda, I do feel we shall be real sisters. Alick's wife will be a very important factor in my life, and I warn you that I shall make demands on your sympathy and affection. Must you go?' as Gerda rose from her chair. 'How I wish Alick could have fetched you; but his time is not his own.'

'I shall see him to-night,' replied Gerda. 'To-morrow mother is expected, and he says he shall leave us together the first evening. Good-bye; thank you for all you have told me,' and Gerda kissed her with real affection.

'She will be very much to me; I feel that already,' she said to herself as she walked quickly down the road. 'I am so glad I like his sister, it makes everything nicer. Oh, if only mother will agree with me; if she will only take him into her heart!' And then, as was natural, Gerda's thoughts relapsed to the subject of her lover's perfections, which occupied her happily until she reached the Vicarage.

A dark figure was standing on the steps as she opened the gate. For the moment her heart beat faster. But no, it was too tall for Dr. Lyall. Perhaps it was Derrick Vincent. But just then the door opened, and she heard a well-known voice asking for her, and the voice belonged to her cousin Gerard.

'I am here behind you, Gerard!' she exclaimed, but her heart sank as she spoke, and he turned at once to greet her.

'Have you been out this dismal afternoon? It is quite late, but I remember you were always fond of a prowl.'

There was a trace of nervousness in Gerard's voice, and he hardly looked at her as he spoke; and then he busied himself in taking off his great-coat and gloves.

Gerda stood beside him demurely, and then preceded him into the drawing-room; but her face fell a little when she saw it was empty.

'I suppose Aunt Clare is in the study? She is generally there in the afternoon.' And she would have gone at once in search of her, but Gerard stopped her.

'There is no hurry, is there? I shall see her presently, and I asked for you.'

Then Gerda followed him reluctantly to the fireside. She had been so happy the minute before, but this moment was cruelly embarrassing to her. Must she tell Gerard, or had he heard already? Would Doris have told him? She glanced at him anxiously. He was nervous—decidedly nervous—but he seemed much as usual. And how well he looked: perhaps she was regarding him more critically this evening; but he certainly was wonderfully handsome.

'I thought you would expect me to look you up,' he said, trying to be at his ease; 'but I have had an awful drive since I have been up in town—not an hour to call my own. I am afraid you have had a bad time of it with Aunt Clare's illness; but you look uncommonly well. I don't think I ever saw you look better——' as though something in her appearance struck him.

'I am very well. Will you sit down, Gerard? Have you heard from mother or Doris?'

'Not since last week. I had a note from Doris then. Ah, by-the-bye, she says you are going home soon.'

'I don't know; I am not quite sure. Did—did anyone tell you that mother is coming up?'

'No!' with an air of extreme surprise. 'Do you mean that Aunt Honoria will really be able to leave the Hall? I thought'—becoming more perplexed—'that Uncle Godfrey had one of his attacks threatening. How can she leave him? Doris will be frightened to death.' Then he caught sight of Gerda's face; she was looking hot, uncomfortable. And, what was it? There was something underneath this; he could not make her out at all. She did not seem inclined to meet his eyes; she was shy with him, she—good heavens!

He had heard that this was a good sign with women. Could she have changed her mind? Had absence done something for him? Never mind about her mother, he must find this out first. 'I asked for you,' he began, stammering over his words; 'I have been longing to see you.' But Gerda interrupted him; she had caught the sudden gleam in his eyes, and her woman's instinct warned her of danger. She could hear the doubt, the ring of renewed hope in his tone; she must save him from a second mistake.

'Yes, Gerard,' she said, more calmly than she felt; 'and I wanted to see you, too. I felt there was something you ought to know, that would have to be told you.' Then the light died out of his face.

'What do you mean?' he asked suspiciously. 'Has anything happened?'

'Everything has happened to me,' very softly. 'Gerard, I am afraid you will be sorry; but you ought to know it—I am engaged to Dr. Lyall!'

'No!' he returned, springing to his feet. 'No, impossible! And I will not believe it!' But even as he spoke he knew in the depths of his heart that the thing was true. She had gone from him; she was out of his reach now and for ever; but he would never have won her, never!'

'Ah, but you must believe it,' she returned gently, very gently. 'Gerard dear, I am sorry for your sake that things are so; but if you knew how happy it has made me——'

Then he sat down again, and she knew by his expression that he was pulling himself together.

'I suppose it is true, if you say it,' he returned slowly; 'but I am very, very much surprised; somehow I never thought of this. So he did not pull you out of the water for nothing?' he added bitterly.

Gerda felt that there was no answer to be made to this, so she remained silent; but the tears gathered slowly in her eyes. If Gerard only knew how all this pained her.

'I ought not to be mean enough to grudge you to the man who has won you,' he went on presently. 'You are not the girl to engage yourself to anyone, unless you care for him.'

'No, Gerard.'

'So I must wish you joy and all that.' Here Gerard

tugged at his moustache, and looked gloomily in the fire; so it was not to be wondered that his felicitations fell a little flat. 'He is a lucky fellow, that is all I can say.' He relapsed into a brown study for a few minutes, and then asked abruptly: 'What do they say about it at the Hall?'

Gerda shook her head sadly. 'Grand has refused his consent.'

'No! By Jove, has he?'

'Yes; and he is very angry. He told mother that unless I gave up this folly, he would not have me back at the Hall. That is why mother is coming up, because we must see each other.'

'I was afraid there would be a row. Lyall has not much of a pile, has he?'

'Oh no, he is not very well off. He has not long been in practice; that is why Grand is so furious. I am afraid things will not be very smooth with us; but of course, nothing Grand can do or say will alter matters.'

'No; I suppose not.'

'No, indeed; how can anything make a difference? That is why Grand is so foolish. He will only spoil things, and worry mother and Doris to death, and in the end he will be obliged to give way.'

'Well, you must give him time to get used to the idea. Look here, Gerda, I have not played the man this afternoon; but it was so confoundedly sudden, don't you know. It was like having a shower-bath without pulling the string. But I'll promise you one thing. I will try and make things square with you and Uncle Godfrey.'

'Oh, Gerard, will you really?'

'Well, I will do my best; but you know what an obstinate old fellow he is. I suppose suppressed gout makes a man cantankerous; but certainly Uncle Godfrey does not get more amiable as he grows older.' And here he got up from his chair.

Gerda looked at him in alarm.

'Oh, Gerard, you are not going! What will Aunt Clare say?'

'Give her my love, and tell her I will look her up again soon, but that I could not stay to-night.'

'Not if I ask you to stay?' looking at him sorrowfully; but he shook his head very decidedly.

'Better not. Lyall will be here this evening, will he not?' And Gerda was obliged to own that he would be there. 'I should be rather like the skeleton at the feast. No, thank you.' Gerard spoke a little sullenly, but when he saw the sadness in her eyes, his good heart spoke out. 'Don't look so miserable,' he said, holding her hands in a tight grip, but Gerda did not wince. 'Look here, I shall get over this all right—fellows always do—so you need not take it to heart. It is no fault of yours. I'll come and see you again, when I am in a better humour. There, God bless you!' He wrung her hand and turned away, and a moment afterwards she heard the hall-door close upon him.

Gerda felt very miserable as she went upstairs; the brief interview had been an ordeal. She was tasting at this moment the bitterness which a sensitive and unselfish nature must always experience at witnessing inevitable pain. If only Gerard could be happy, too! That was her inward cry. But at present he must suffer; she could do nothing to help him! For after all, life is full of this esoteric misery—this futile longing to take some heavy burden on our own shoulders, that can only be borne by the beloved object. Deep grief is always lonely grief. Each human heart has its holy of holies, and its lowest depths where no sympathy can fully enter. Only the one Divine Man could suffer vicariously, could drink the accumulated bitterness of human suffering; but with all others, each must bear his or her heaviest burden along the toilsome path of life.

When Dr. Lyall came that evening, he detected at once the cloud on Gerda's brow.

Mrs. Glyn and Bessie were in the room, and he could find no opportunity to question her, until he took his leave and she followed him into the hall. It was an attention that he seemed always to expect of her. 'You must let Dr. Lyall out,' Mrs. Glyn had said to her the first night, and since then she had done so unasked.

'What is it, dear?' he asked anxiously, as he drew her into the empty dining-room, for his keen eyes had detected the marks of recent tears.

'Gerard has been here,' she whispered. Then his arm pressed her more closely.

'Was it so bad as all that, darling?'

'It was certainly very bad. Poor Gerard, he did look so unhappy! He had not expected it in the least, and he could not quite hide what he felt.'

'Oh, I see.' And Dr. Lyall's face was rather grave.

'But he was so good and dear with it all. He has promised to talk to Grand, and to try to soften him; and Gerard always does what he says.'

'I should imagine so. He is a fine fellow—a thoroughly good fellow. When I think of it, I cannot help wondering at my own good luck. Are you sure you have done well for yourself?'—putting his hand gently under her chin to look into her eyes—'a handsome fellow like Hamlyn, and rich, too, and a poor, shabby doctor;' but Gerda shook herself free with much dignity.

'I will not have you talk in that way; it is not right to me or to yourself. If you were ten times poorer—if you had not a penny in the world—it would make no difference, as long as you are you, and I am myself!'

'You are right, darling; that was well said. Poor Hamlyn, I pity him with all my heart! I would not change places with any man on earth. Now bid me good-night.' But it was some minutes after this that the gate of St. Jude's Vicarage closed on Dr. Lyall.

CHAPTER XXXIII

MRS. MEREDITH CAPITULATES

'In no relation does woman exercise so deep an influence, both immediately and prospectively, as in a mother.'—CARTER.

'Men have marble, women waxen minds,
And therefore are they form'd as marble will.'
SHAKESPEARE.

MRS. MEREDITH arrived the next morning, and Dr. Lyall kept his resolution of leaving the mother and daughter together; but, after all, Gerda did not get her mother to herself until the evening was nearly over.

Mrs. Meredith had not seen her sister for more than two years, and she was much shocked at the delicacy of her appearance.

'Clare looks ten years older,' she said very seriously, when she was alone with her brother-in-law; 'actually there are gray streaks in her hair, and she is so dreadfully worn and thin;' and there was a reproachful expression in her eyes, as though he were somehow to blame for this.

'We are none of us younger,' he returned, with a shrug of his shoulders. 'You are rather thin yourself, Honoria. I think you forget all that Clare has been through. The parting with Walter has tried her much.'

'But you have good accounts of him.'

'Well, we have only heard twice. He had been very sea-sick, but was getting on his legs again. But he wrote cheerfully.'

And then Mr. Glyn muttered an excuse about some

letters and went off to his study. A *tête-à-tête* with his sister-in-law was not much to his taste; she had a habit of implying in a mild, ladylike way that Clare had not done well for herself in marrying him. Honoria's want of tact and his own stubborn stiff-neckedness did not allow of much sympathy between them; and Clare always owned to herself sorrowfully that Horace never appeared at his best when her sister stayed at the Vicarage.

The sisters were much overcome at meeting; even Clare shed a few tears, as she lay on the couch with Honoria beside her. Gerda had left them together for a long time, and had carried off Bessie.

'Mother will talk about Walter, and that will do Aunt Clare good,' she said, as she went to the room prepared for Mrs. Meredith and unpacked her mother's things and arranged them carefully. Mrs. Meredith was accustomed to be waited upon, and was always helpless without her maid.

Gerda busied herself very cheerfully. It was delightful to feel that her mother was in the house.

'Aunt Clare is as dear as possible, but no one can replace one's mother,' she thought, as she smoothed the dress that Roberts had carefully placed for her mistress to wear that night.

Mrs. Meredith was in no hurry for that conversation with her daughter; she would willingly have postponed it until the next day, but Gerda's youthful eagerness could brook no delay. The moment her Aunt Clare had retired under Bessie's supervision, she carried off her mother to her room.

'No one will interrupt us here, and I cannot wait any longer,' she said impetuously; and then she drew up the easy-chair to the fire, and found herself a stool at her mother's feet.

But when half an hour had passed, she was still listening with a pained expression to Mrs. Meredith's lugubrious sentences, and was obliged to admit that as yet she had found no comfort. Gerda had to pay the penalty of being a stronger woman than her mother. Mrs. Meredith's soft, pliable nature was sadly deficient in backbone; her daughter's courage and independent spirit filled her with dismay. At no time in her life had she ever ventured to assert her own will against her father.

Gerda was only a girl, and she loved her mother dearly · but she was keenly and acutely alive to her deficiencies. She might win her to her side eventually—Honoria had always been guided by her young daughters—but of what avail was such a timorous ally ?

'Poor dear mother !' she sighed ; and then she summoned up patience to wait until those long, rambling explanations —those disjointed statements and jumbled-up facts—had flowed like a turbid stream from Mrs. Meredith's troubled soul. Only once she checked her a little haughtily :

'Let us keep to the point, mother ; we are not talking about Gerard. Gerard has nothing in the world to do with my engagement to Dr. Lyall.'

'No, of course not,' replied Mrs. Meredith, rather frightened at this stern rebuke. 'But you need not be so sharp with me, Gerda ; I am quite unhappy enough as it is. I was only telling you that, in my opinion and Doris's, Gerard would be far preferable as a lover ; if I remember—but I am sure I did not notice him much—Dr. Lyall is not even good-looking.'

Gerda uttered an impatient exclamation, but she was too proud to refute this. Their opinion should be nothing to her.

'That is what Doris said directly. She thought him a little rough in appearance—not trim and well turned out like Gerard. But, then, Gerard has all his coats from Bond Street, and, of course,' dolorously, 'Dr. Lyall has to content himself with a second-class tailor.'

No answer ; only an ominous tightening of Gerda's lips.

'It is better for you to know what we all think,' went on Mrs. Meredith, floundering still deeper into the Slough of Despond. 'And then he is so much older—he is thirty-two, is he not ?'

'Nearly thirty-three.'

'And you are only one-and-twenty. That is eleven—twelve years difference ! You may be left a widow with a large family before you are forty. I do not believe medical men live as long as other people ; they work so hard, and going out at night in all weathers undermines their constitution ; and then what would you do ?'

'Mother,' returned Gerda, in her clear, indignant young

voice, 'I looked for opposition and want of sympathy, for of course Grand has been talking to you, but I hardly expected this. You are not fair on—' she hesitated, tried to say 'Alick,' and substituted 'him' rather lamely.

'My dear child!'

'I suppose I must hear what my mother chooses to say to me, but it is very hard to bear. Dr. Lyall is not young; he is not good-looking; he is poor, and has to work hard; but in spite of all these defects—these unpardonable defects in yours and Grand's and Doris's eyes—he is the only man I could ever bring myself to marry.'

'Dear me, Gerda, are you quite sure of that?'—shrinking a little at her daughter's tone.

'Am I sure that I am on this stool at your feet? Oh, mother, what has made you so hard? When you married my father did you do so because he was young and handsome, and had expectations from his uncle, Lord Galveston?'

Then, at this appeal, the widow's heart melted within her. For none of these reasons had she married her Algy.

'I married him because we loved each other dearly,' she sobbed, for she still mourned for him as faithfully as ever.

'Just so; and that is why I shall marry Alick,' and this time she brought out the name triumphantly. 'I shall marry him because I love and honour and respect him above all other men.'

Then, as Mrs. Meredith saw the wonderful light in her child's eyes, she felt herself vanquished. If this were really true—if Gerda had really given her whole heart, she had nothing more to say.

'I never thought you cared for him in that way,' rather feebly.

'Ah, but you know now. I am showing you all that is in my heart. Mother, you will be good to us, whatever Grand may do? Doris and I have no father.'

Then Mrs. Meredith sobbed aloud, and clasped her daughter in her arms.

'Don't say any more, darling; I cannot bear it. No one shall come between me and my Algy's children. You are so like him, Gerda; you have got his nose and chin,

and when you smile you remind me of him. You must not be vexed with me because I wanted you to have Gerard. It was only because I would have smoothed your path, and have had everything easy for you. Is it a sin to be ambitious for my children? I want nothing for myself—only for you and Doris.'

'Yes, mother dear, I know that,' and Gerda nestled up to her more closely. 'I am not blaming you—I am not even blaming Grand, although he is so cruel to me; I only want you to look at things with my eyes.'

'I will try, Gerda,' very meekly.

'Then will you believe that I am not a bit anxious about my future life? I know that things will be different. I shall have no Roberts to see to my dresses, no horses or carriages for my own use; I shall miss a hundred little luxuries to which I have become accustomed; but what of that? Perhaps my life will be hard'—pausing thoughtfully over her words—'he—he has never promised that it would be easy. It may even be'—here she shuddered—'that you are right in your dreadful prophecy, and I may be left a widow. What then? Are there no other widows in this sad, sad world? And I shall have had my life—one can only live once,' finished Gerda with solemnity.

No wonder Mrs. Meredith regarded her daughter with perplexity and awe. She was a simple woman, and took her life simply. To love her children—to obey and humour her old father, and never to forget that she was a Hamlyn—this was her creed!

The conversation flowed more smoothly after this. Mrs. Meredith had consented to lower her flag, and now a mild interest began to awake within her; she became curious on the subject of Dr. Lyall's house, his family connections, and the extent of his practice; and Gerda was quite willing to enlighten her.

After all, Mrs. Meredith was a woman, and a kind-hearted woman, too. Any real romance, any love-story, stirred her pulses, as an old war-horse is moved by a distant trumpet, and she could not listen to her daughter without pleasurable excitement. For the next fortnight she would be safe from Sir Godfrey's flouts and sneers; for fourteen whole days she might give herself up to her child's interest.

'Roadside? Is that the name of Dr. Lyall's house?' she asked.

'Yes; but you will not think much of it. It is a roomy, shabby old house; and the furniture is shabby, too.'

Then Mrs. Meredith sighed. Her father had once promised her that when Gerard married, the drawing-room and morning-room, and a suite of apartments upstairs called the Ladies' Gallery, should be refurnished. But Gerda had refused all this magnificence. The Hamlyn diamonds would never repose on her white neck; neither would she inhabit the Ladies' Gallery.

'Are you tired, mother dear? Am I keeping you up too late?' asked Gerda, struck by the weariness in Mrs. Meredith's eyes.

'I think I am tired,' returned the poor woman plaintively; but it was not physical fatigue that made her eyes so heavy. And then Gerda blamed herself in no measured terms for her selfishness.

'You must let me stay and help you; you must not miss Roberts,' she pleaded. And Mrs. Meredith did not refuse her help. After all, it was sweet to feel her child's hands about her again. Gerda's soft touch seemed to tranquillize her, and allay the vague pain that she still felt.

'If it be for her happiness, if he be really all she imagines him to be,' she said to herself, as she stretched her tired limbs under the quilt, 'I will not go against them. Clare speaks highly of him.' And then in the darkness she felt for her wedding-ring. How thin and worn it was after all these years, since Algy had placed it on her finger! 'She is very like him,' she murmured, as she grew more drowsy; and then she fell asleep.

Dr. Lyall had promised to pay his respects as early in the afternoon as possible, and Clare had playfully but peremptorily desired that no one should enter the drawing-room.

'Honoria must sit in state to receive him,' she said, as her husband seemed inclined to contradict this. 'There must be no curious eyes, no eavesdropping, no impertinent callers, to mar the solemnity of the occasion.'

'I wish you would not talk so, Clare,' remonstrated her sister nervously. She had dressed herself very carefully, and

the little flush on her face made her look quite young and handsome. 'If I only knew what to say to him!' she added, dropping some stitches in her agitation. 'It was bad enough talking to Gerda last night, but this is a hundred times worse. I never could manage men—not even Algy.' And in this she was right. The young captain of hussars had tyrannized royally over his loving wife. As Sir Godfrey had once told her, 'Honoria was born to be a slave'; and in her secret soul she had owned that this also was the truth.

'Well, I do not envy you,' returned Clare maliciously, for she was not above teasing her sister. 'Dr. Lyall can be very dignified when he likes. He is not one of those pliant, easy-tempered men, who can be humoured. He has strong opinions on every point, and he lets you know them.'

'Oh, indeed?' And Honoria's hands fumbled still more nervously at her knitting.

'Yes; and of course my father's treatment has not sweetened his temper. I should not wonder if he be a little sarcastic at your expense. You see, he is not a man to be beaten without showing fight, and——'

'Oh, do go away, Clare! You are making me positively ill. I shall not be able to speak to him. I—— Oh dear! oh dear! is that his ring? Gerda'—as that young lady entered—'do please look out of the window, and tell me if a doctor's brougham is at the door.'

'No, mother dear. But of course he has walked; he always does here.'

Then Mrs. Meredith was obliged to lay aside her work. Her hands shook so she could hardly hold the needles. Clare flashed a naughty glance at her as she left the room. She was not too weak to enjoy her little joke.

Dr. Lyall paused to compliment her on her looks.

'We have done you a world of good, Mrs. Glyn,' he observed significantly.

'My sister is in there,' she returned; and then she looked straight at him with a meaning smile. 'She is very nervous, poor dear! Honoria is always nervous. As you are strong, be merciful.' And then she nodded to him, and entered her husband's study.

Dr. Lyall smiled also. He was not the least nervous; on the contrary, he was delighted that Gerda's mother was

there. Gerda advanced to meet him as usual, and put out her hand; but Dr. Lyall took more than that.

'Surely you do not mind your mother?' he remonstrated, as she blushed almost painfully at this unexpected greeting; and then he turned to Mrs. Meredith. 'I hope you are going to be good to me,' he said simply, as he shook hands with her.

Mrs. Meredith was a weak woman with regard to backbone, but she was not without common-sense, and from that moment she respected her daughter for her choice. When Dr. Lyall looked her in the face with those clear, honest eyes, and spoke those few words, she capitulated in a moment.

'I do hope you will be good to me, and to Gerda too,' he continued, still standing before her with quiet dignity, 'and that you will be my friend with Sir Godfrey.'

Mrs. Meredith stammered something not perfectly audible, and he saw at once that Mrs. Glyn was right, and that she was excessively nervous.

'You must come and help me talk to your mother,' he said, putting a chair for Gerda, and placing himself on the couch between them. 'We are like people speaking a different language at present, we need an interpreter, do we not, Mrs. Meredith?'

Then she explained, not without dignity, that her position was a difficult one; in siding with her child she had to oppose her father. 'And you know,' in her plaintive lady-like voice, 'that my children and I are dependent upon him.'

'Yes, I know that; Gerda has told me so already.' Then he took the girl's hand in his. 'But all the same, you are her mother—her very nearest and dearest relative—and it is to you that I must apply after Sir Godfrey's refusal. Surely'—speaking very persuasively—'you will not deny me this?' and Mrs. Meredith felt the touch of her daughter's fingers very close to hers.

'It is not for me to refuse it,' she said a little piteously. 'Gerda tells me that her happiness depends on you.'

'I hope so—I believe so; even as mine depends on her. Not for worlds would I deny this. Then will you try to put up with my defects for her sake?'

'Your defects, Dr. Lyall?'

'Yes; are they not grievous defects?' smiling at her obvious perplexity. 'Are you so unworldly yourself, Mrs. Meredith, that you do not understand that poverty, or at least lack of wealth, is a heinous sin?'

'Ah, I see now what you mean.'

'Yes, and you feel the truth of my words, though you are too kind to say so; but at least I will promise you this, that I will do all that a man can do to augment my income.' And then he explained to her frankly the extent of his resources, and his views for the future.

'Would you not like me to leave you with mother?' Gerda had whispered once, for all this practical talk was a little embarrassing. But he shook his head.

'No, no. Why should you go? Is not this your business as much as it is mine? Do you want me to believe that my affairs do not interest you?' and then she had been compelled to yield.

Dr. Lyall was in one of his quiet, masterful moods, when his will was felt to be law. His patients knew these moods well.

'If I might be allowed to state my wishes,' he continued, after a little more talk, 'it would be that Gerda accompanies you on your return to the Hall.'

'But I am going home in a fortnight, Dr. Lyall.'

'So I understood. Well, Mrs. Glyn is so much stronger that Gerda can be spared by then. You are surprised,' as the girl looked at him mutely; 'you think it a doubtful compliment that I should propose your going so soon. But I am thinking of the future. I want Sir Godfrey to become reconciled to the idea of our engagement.'

'I am afraid,' rather dubiously, 'that there will be little peace for any of us if I take Gerda home.'

'Oh, you must not damp our courage in that way,' he returned cheerfully: for Gerda and I have made up our minds to be brave. You have no idea what time and a little perseverance will do. But I was going to propose another plan, if you will not think me over-bold. Why should I not escort Mrs. Glyn to the Hall, as she is not strong enough to travel alone, and then I can have an interview with Sir Godfrey?'

'Oh, mother!' exclaimed Gerda breathlessly, for this idea was too delightful altogether.

But Mrs. Meredith merely looked unhappy.

'I do not know how to answer you,' she said hurriedly. 'My father is not easy to manage; he may not be inclined to welcome you. It is always best to speak the truth, Dr. Lyall, and I can offer you no hope that your visit will be a pleasant one.'

'I will take my chance of that,' he returned briskly. 'Sir Godfrey can hardly refuse to see me after so long a journey. Now I am afraid I must not keep my patients waiting any longer. I believe my sister will do herself the pleasure of calling on you, Mrs. Meredith.'

'We have met already at Chesterton, have we not?'

'Oh, you mean Pamela; but I was speaking of my sister, Mrs. Vincent.'

Then Mrs. Meredith replied very graciously that she would be glad to make Mrs. Vincent's acquaintanceship.

'Is the coast clear?—has the enemy retired?' asked Clare, peeping cautiously into the room. Gerda was exchanging a few last words with her lover. 'Oh, I see you are alone. Well, what do you think of him, Honoria?'

'He is far nicer than I expected.'

'Oh, I was sure you would say that.'

'He is not good-looking, but he is very gentlemanly; and, then, he has such quiet manners.'

'In fact, you found him irresistible.'

'Well, not quite that; but I believe that I shall like him. And dear Gerda is so happy; and, then, he was so gentle with us both, although it was easy to see that he means to hold his own. Altogether, he is rather out of the common.'

And Clare professed herself perfectly pleased with this eulogium.

'I like your mother, dear,' observed Dr. Lyall, as Gerda looked appealingly at him; 'she is just my idea of an old-fashioned gentlewoman. I know now from whom you have got your pretty manners. Hester will be delighted with her.'

'You managed her beautifully.'

'Did I? I was rather afraid that I was a little masterful

Poor Mrs. Meredith! we shall give her a good deal of anxiety. She seems terribly afraid of Sir Godfrey.'

'She has been afraid of him all her life.'

'I can imagine that. Her nature is a timorous one. We must not put too great a strain upon her. I shall have to take things in my own hand—I can see that.'

'Shall you really come down with Aunt Clare?'

'We will settle that presently. Seven weeks is a long time, and a good deal may happen before then.'

But Dr. Lyall had no idea, as he said this, that his words were a true prophecy, and that much would happen before he paid that visit to Chesterton Hall.

CHAPTER XXXIV

MRS. HAKE HAS AN IDEA

When thou hast been compelled by circumstances to be disturbed in a manner, quickly return to thyself and do not continue out of tune longer than the compulsion lasts; for thou wilt have more mastery over the harmony by continually recurring to it.'—M. AURELIUS ANTONINUS.

GERARD'S next visit to St. Jude's Vicarage was rather inopportune; Gerda was spending the evening at Daintree House, and they did not meet. Gerard left her a message; he would not wait for her return. He was going down to Chesterton the next day, and he was not sure when he should be in town again.

'He was as nice as possible,' observed Mrs. Meredith; 'but both Clare and I thought him rather out of spirits. He took a great deal of notice of Janie and Nora, and talked most about Walter, so of course Clare was delighted with him.'

'And he is going down to the Hall to-morrow?' returned Gerda thoughtfully.

Dr. Lyall had just taken his leave, and she stood by the fire, with her fur cloak just dropping from her shoulders. She was in her favourite blue velveteen dress, and looked more like a Saxon princess than ever.

'She is very pretty,' thought the mother with a sigh; 'she is far prettier then she used to be.' But she only remarked aloud: 'You will scorch your dress if you stand so close to the fire. Yes, he is going down by the 2.15 train; he means to take them by surprise. It is all his

thoughtfulness for Doris. He says it is a shame to leave the poor little thing alone any longer.'

'That is so like Gerard,' was Gerda's only answer; and then they both went upstairs.

Gerard had another reason besides his kind wish to cheer the forlorn little damsel, Doris. Cromehurst was rather too near London for his peace of mind. Gerard was not in an enviable state of mind just now; he felt sore and injured. The world—his own little world—had treated him badly. His great-uncle had taken advantage of his easy nature and disengaged affections to cajole and wheedle him into proposing to Gerda. He had consented to try his luck, as he called it, and had been refused with covert amusement and a trifle of disdain; whereupon, the sturdy tenacity of his bulldog British nature had suddenly discovered that it was a disgrace to be beaten. He would try again; and, lo and behold, the play had waxed grim earnest. Gerard had to learn by painful experience that playing with sharp-edged tools is a dangerous game—the weapons had been turned against himself; and at the moment he lost her he would have given up anything he had to win her for his wife!

Gerard's nature was by no means a weak one, and after the first he was not the man to cry out because his desire had not been granted. He had lived through a few bad moments while Gerda had informed him of her engagement, and in the fierceness of his pain he had not been able to refrain from some expression of regret and dismay. He had not played the man, as he had said himself, and now, as discretion is the better part of valour, he felt that it behoved him to seek safety in flight.

A burnt child dreads the fire, and poor Gerard had unhappily been severely scorched. But he was not without his consolations. 'We are never so happy or unhappy as we suppose,' wrote the wise and witty Queen of Roumania; and somehow in that brusque statement she hit on a wide truth. There are margins of possibilities to most human troubles to be filled up by minor or major consolations; and even a luckless lover need not go downcast and disquieted like Malvolio, while there are bright eyes and kind hearts ready to cheer the sufferer. As Gerard took possession of his seat in the comfortable first-class compartment and read

his *Times* he was not wholly miserable. Doris would be kind to him, he thought. She would look at him with pathetic blue eyes while he unfolded his tale of grievances; he could hear her 'Poor Gerard!' quite clearly. Yes, she was a dear good child, and he was very fond of her; how pleased she would be to see him! She would come running out to meet him, with Flip and Flop, his fox-terriers, behind her. Somehow, when Doris came flying down the walk, with her curly hair all ruffled by the wind, and her pretty girlish hands stretched out to him, he always felt inclined to treat her like a child, and take her in his arms and kiss her. But he had never ventured on such a liberty. With all her childishness and innocent naïveté, Doris was a dignified little person, and she would have resented any liberty, even from her dear Gerard. Mrs. Meredith had brought up her daughters well; they were perhaps a trifle stiff in their behaviour to the other sex. Men who visited at the Hall found it impossible to begin a flirtation. 'They have no idea, don't you know,' observed one proverbial lady-killer—Captain Drummond—to Charlie Seymour, in the gossip of the smoking-room. 'I tried the elder one first—she is most to my taste—but she did not seem to see it at all; and as for the other one—Miss Doris—she opened her eyes until they were double their size, and said: "You really can't mean what you are saying, Captain Drummond? Of course, it is only fun;" and that sort of thing shuts a man up, don't you know.'

'No, I don't know,' replied Charlie rather shortly, for he was not pleased at this burst of confidence. 'I never tried it on either of them. They are too awfully jolly for that, don't you know'—with a sly caricature of Captain Drummond's style.

Drummond's 'don't you knows' were slightly tedious to his friends.

Gerard felt quite soothed as he contemplated this little picture, and he was able to enjoy a capital leading article. Even his long walk gave him pleasure. After Bond Street and St. James's it was pleasant to see the budding hedgerows and to hear the twittering of birds busy with family cares. It was the last day of March, and there was an April brightness in the clear blue sky, and soft evening lights.

'Is that yourself, Squire?' observed old Giles Andover, leaning over his cottage gate to inspect village affairs and exchange greetings with his neighbours.

Sir Godfrey was always Sir Godfrey, but of late years Gerard had been known as the Squire.

'Haven't they sent to fetch you from the station?'

'No, Giles. I have not told them I was coming. I thought I would walk up and give them a surprise.'

'Aye, aye; that wasn't a bad notion, Squire. Miss went by just now with the whole pack of dogs. She stopped to speak to my missus. Well, good-evening! Maybe ye'll drop in next time you pass and give us a bit of Lunnon news.' For the young Squire was very popular in the village. Every man, woman, and child had a good word for him.

'After all, other fellows would think I am to be envied,' thought Gerard as he walked on towards the Hall.

Below him lay a belt of green meadows, with the red cattle, so dear to Sir Godfrey's heart, feeding on the thick juicy herbage.

'All this will come to me before many years are over. A title, a good house, and sufficient money to keep things going. I suppose most men would be satisfied. And yet that girl has made such a fool of me that I don't seem to have heart for anything.' He stopped, twirled his stick fiercely, then stopped to inspect a broken paling. 'Smedley ought to have had this mended long ago,' he said to himself quite angrily. 'He takes advantage of Uncle Godfrey. Master Smedley shall smart for this.' Then he walked on more briskly. 'I am bound to get over it,' he went on; 'fellows always do. One cannot go on year after year wanting to cut one's throat; it is against nature. I agree with that old buffer—what's his name—"What care I how fair she be, if she be not fair for me?" But all the same'—with a groan—'it is precious bad while it lasts.' Gerard broke off here, not because he had exhausted his moralizing, but because his eyes had caught sight of a blue gown behind the great deodora at the side of the house. He was sure the dress belonged to Doris, though she was still at some distance from him, and as he turned off the gravel path and crossed the lawn he could see her more distinctly. She was

sitting on the garden seat with her back towards him. She had a gray deer-stalker's hat on her curly head, and she was talking in an audible voice to Sultan, Gerard's big black retriever.

Some of Gerard's old boyish mischief woke up at this sight. He dearly loved to startle Doris. She always screamed so deliciously. So he crept stealthily round the deodora and waited his opportunity.

But as he lurked within ear-shot, such a sad little voice reached him. Doris was pulling Sultan's glossy ears and looking into the dog's wistful brown eyes.

'You miss him, too, don't you, Sultan? It is dreadfully dreary without Gerard. It is not home a bit; it is nothing but a big, dismal old Hall. What shall we do to comfort him, dear? He will be so unhappy; and yet there is nothing that we would not do for him—nothing. Oh! oh! oh!'—as Sultan wriggled out of her hands with a joyous bark, and a big gray figure emerged from the deodora.

'Good-evening, Doey! Have I given you a turn? Why, you foolish child, have I really startled you?' And Gerard's voice had a concerned tone. Doris had not screamed, had not flown to him. She had jumped from her seat as though she had been shot, and her cheeks were quite white and her lips trembling. It was evident, even to his inexperienced eyes, that she was very much startled indeed.

'Why—why—how long have you been there?' she gasped.

'Only a minute. I thought it would be such a joke to see you start, but it doesn't seem to have agreed with you. Why on earth are you so scared?' And Gerard looked at her quite mystified. This was not the reception he had expected; he had never seen Doris look pale before, except once, when she had turned faint in a hot crowded church, and he had carried her out. Was she faint now? Her lips were pressed tightly together, and there was a pained look in her eyes.

'Oh, come now,' he said soothingly, 'I shall think you are not glad to see me. You were far kinder to Sultan. What was that you were saying to him about me—eh—what?' For Doris had roused from her stupor now, and was actually stamping her little foot at him.

'How dare you—how dare you listen to what I was saying,' she panted, 'when I thought you were a hundred miles away? I will not look at you; I will not speak to you!' And Doris burst into a flood of passionate tears, and ran into the house, leaving Gerard in a state of amazement bordering on stupefaction.

'Good heavens!' he said to himself. 'Has the child lost her senses?' Never in all the years that he had known her, which was from her babyhood, had Doris ever been angry with him before. He could not—he simply could not—remember hearing a cross word from her lips.

If this were the consolation vouchsafed to him, he might as well take the next train back to London. Gerard was waxing irate with disappointment; the ways of women were inscrutable, he told himself, as he kicked the stones at his feet somewhat sulkily. Sultan, who had exhausted his raptures, and had met with no response, stood wagging his tail feebly, and looking at him with reproachful adoration.

'If women fail, dogs are true,' he seemed to say; and then he lay down on the gravel with that mute unreasoning patience that seems inherent in canine nature.

Gerard dropped his stick; then he picked it up and patted Sultan; and then they stalked solemnly side by side into the Hall. But Gerard was not to be deprived of all consolation, though it was to come to him in an unexpected form. For lo and behold! as he walked in at the open door, a comely substantial figure emerged from behind the farther screen, and Mrs. Hake's pleasant, good-tempered face beamed on him.

'Good gracious, Mr. Hamlyn! have you arrived in a balloon? I have been sitting with Sir Godfrey for nearly an hour, and he told me you were still in London. But here you are, as large as life, or larger!'

'I should say larger. Yes, here I am, and how's the Captain?'

'Oh, Lionel is always well; nothing ever ails him. Do you know where Doris is? Sir Godfrey told me to find her, and ask her for some tea.'

'She was in the garden just now. She is taking off her hat, I believe; but there is no need to wait for her. I shall be glad of some tea, too;' and Gerard pulled the bell and

gave his orders. 'And look sharp about it, Stephens,' he finished. 'And, I say,' calling the footman back, 'you need not mention to Sir Godfrey that I am here. I will go to the library myself presently. Just bring the tea, and don't keep us waiting.' And, as the young Squire's word was law at the Hall, Mrs. Hake soon found herself ensconced at the low tea-table, with Gerard in a hammock chair beside her. 'It is like old times, having you to make tea for me, Mrs. Hake,' observed Gerard, with some return of cheerfulness.

He and Mrs. Hake were good friends. She was a sociable, even-tempered woman, and had no difficult ways with her; she was always the same; she had no variable moods; no impertinent little tricks to play upon confiding friends. Her humour was broad and sweet-tempered too; and though she had a will of her own, she could exercise it without malice. Gerard was a great favourite of hers, and in her opinion Gerda was hardly good enough for him. For the last hour she had been enduring Sir Godfrey's bitter monologue of lamentation, but in her heart she had not fully sympathized with him. She liked Dr. Lyall, and she thought Gerda had not done so amiss after all; but she had had the tact to keep this opinion to herself.

'You will not find your uncle in the best of tempers,' she said significantly, as she gave Gerard a cup of tea. 'He is very much put out about your cousin's engagement.'

Mrs. Hake had hesitated at first to introduce the subject. She was quite aware of the reason for Mr. Hamlyn's unusual glumness, but she had made up her mind at last that it would be well to say something.'

'Of course she might have done better for herself in a worldly point of view.'

'Perhaps so.'

'But all the same Dr. Lyall is one of the nicest men I know.'

'So they say; but he is almost a stranger to me. Still, I liked what I saw of him.'

'Oh, to be sure, he only came to the Hall three or four times, but he was more than a week at Braeside. We got quite intimate before he left us. Lionel is devoted to him; he was quite excited when Doris told him about the engagement.'

Mrs. Hake paused and poured herself out another cup of tea. She felt that she had said enough on that subject. Gerard's face did not invite sympathy, and though she was sorry for him, she was wise enough to know that his wound was too recent to bear even a word. Gerard's disappointment was known at Braeside; Sir Godfrey had made no secret of it. She must bide her time until she could think of some way to help him; and then again she fell to wondering what had detained Doris.

Gerard thought he would make a clean breast of it; so he narrated briefly his practical joke, and Doris's odd behaviour.

'I could not make her out at all,' he finished; and Mrs. Hake's eyes began to gleam with suppressed amusement.

Mrs. Hake was a match-maker by nature. She always told her friends that she was born to arrange other people's matrimonial affairs. She had a singular genius for detecting future possibilities. Before two young people had awakened to the fact that they were in sympathy with each other, Mrs. Hake had scented orange-blossoms, and had seen the bride and bridegroom drive off from the church door. But there was no vulgar eagerness in the way she worked. No laboured contrivances; nothing but the most delicate tact. In her own words, she was quick to see her opportunity, and to take it.

'You may laugh at me, and call me whatever names you like,' she said once to her husband; 'but it is no crime to like to see people happy.'

'But all the same, even Lyall says you are an inveterate match-maker. He spotted you at once.'

'Yes, but he had no disagreeeble reserve in his thoughts when he said it. Ah, you may jeer, Lionel, but how many young people have to thank me for their happiness?'

'Oh, draw it mild, Gertie! You know you ought to be ashamed of yourself about that Eardley affair. I declare I dare not look old Eardley in the face when I meet him.'

'And yet what have I done?' replied his wife demurely. 'I only said to Mr. Broughton, "I think Alice is practising in the drawing-room;" and before I could say another word, he was across the passage. Poor old Mr. Eardley! Did he think Alice was never to have a husband? If you had only

seen Mr. Broughton's face when he bade me good-bye that evening! I really thought he was going to kiss me in his gratitude.'

'I should like to have seen him do it,' growled Captain Hake, lighting his cigar; for Gertrude's husband was not devoid of jealousy. He would hint sometimes to his wife that she need not make herself so confoundedly agreeable to everyone; and yet in his heart he was secretly proud of her popularity.

'Not a man of them can resist Gertie,' he would say. 'Even the old Crusader—as we call him down here—Sir Godfrey, makes her pretty speeches. Don't they wish they could get a wife like her, that's all!' and Captain Hake marched off chuckling to himself.

So, as Gerard innocently related this little episode, Mrs. Hake's fine eyes began to sparkle and to gleam. Doris was her special favourite. There was little or no sympathy between her and Gerda; the girl's dreaminess and pretty, immature philosophy jarred on the elder woman's practical matter-of-fact wisdom.

'With all her fine speeches, Gerda is a goose,' she would say. But with her Doris was a petted confidante. If only Doris could be the future Lady Hamlyn, how charming, how altogether desirable that would be for the mistress of Braeside! But, to do her justice, Mrs. Hake was not selfish. She had a dim idea—had long had it—that Doris was not always as happy as she seemed. At times she had detected a wistful, almost a troubled look in her eyes.

'I do not think Doris has been quite herself lately,' she said, a little seriously, when Gerard had finished; but she did not look at him as she spoke.

'Not quite well, do you mean?'

'Oh, I believe she is well! Doris is perfectly healthy, but she has not seemed in her usual spirits. You know, Mr. Hamlyn, Doris is quite my favourite. I know most people admire Gerda most, but Doris has such a sweet little face. She is so charmingly young and fresh; and then she is so humble-minded, so utterly unconscious of her own attractions.'

'You are perfectly right,' returned Gerard, with a pleased look; 'she is a dear little thing.'

'Yes, but she is more than that,' almost solemnly. 'There is more in Doris than people think; she is transparent, and yet she is deep.'

'Isn't that rather a paradox, Mrs. Hake?' for Gerard was amused at this eloquent praise of his young cousin. 'Doris is not really deep, you know.'

'Don't be too sure of that,' was the oracular answer. 'One should never be too sure of anything in this world. If I am not mistaken, you do not understand Doris at all; you have not begun to find her out. No one so blind as those who will not see. Take my advice, Mr. Hamlyn, and do not treat Doris as though she were still a child. Now I must be going, or Lionel will think I am lost, and he and all the dogs will be searching for me.' And Mrs. Hake shook his hand with her firm, generous grasp, and smiled at him.

'What on earth does the woman mean?' thought the bewildered young man, as he watched her from the open door. 'She means something—I could see that in her eyes. "Never be too sure of anything in this world; and none are so blind as those who will not see." She is a clever woman—everyone says so; and she is driving at something. Well, I was never a good hand at guessing riddles, so I may as well go and see Uncle Godfrey.' And Gerard squared his broad shoulders, and gave himself a little shake, like a big retriever, and then walked quickly across the hall and knocked at the library door.

CHAPTER XXXV

DORIS

'She is a woman, one in whom
The spring-time of her childish years
Hath never lost its fresh perfume,
Though knowing well that life hath room
For many blights and many tears.'

LOWELL.

GERARD did not enjoy the next three-quarters of an hour.

In the first place, Sir Godfrey was too much surprised at his abrupt entrance to express any pleasure at his return.

Gerard had to submit to a severe examination as to the reason of his eccentric behaviour. Why, for example, had he walked all those miles, when the horses were eating their heads off in the stable? Did he want to spoil a lot of idle, lazy domestics, who had nothing to do but to kick their heels about the place? He was astonished—he was excessively astonished—at Gerard's thoughtlessness and want of dignity!

Gerard answered all this with his usual careless good-nature. He thought his uncle had aged a good deal, and that he looked far from well. Sir Godfrey's fine old features were more pinched than usual, and his head and hands had a tremulous movement; but he was very irascible when Gerard inquired kindly after his health.

'Of course I am not well! Do you suppose that any man would feel well, when he is worried and badgered by a lot of silly women?' And thereupon followed an endless tirade against Gerda's ingratitude and Dr. Lyall's gross im-

pertinence. Dr. Lyall's second letter had been slightly peremptory and defiant—at least, so Sir Godfrey chose to interpret it. He had refused to accept an unconditional denial; he claimed greater justice, and opportunity to plead his cause in person; he refused to be set on one side in that arbitrary fashion. In a word, Dr. Lyall's will was as strong as Sir Godfrey's.

Gerard found no fault with the letter. He handed it back with the remark that he thought his uncle would have to give in to a personal interview. 'You may as well get it over,' he observed easily. 'He has a right to be heard as well as any other man.' But Sir Godfrey would not listen to this for a moment.

'What is the use of having a scene?' he said angrily. 'I should only lose my temper, and tell him to go about his business. I have answered him civilly. I have treated him as I would treat any gentleman; but he has no right to persecute me in this fashion, and I refuse to be persecuted! My grand-daughters must do better for themselves than that.'

'You talk as though they were royal princesses, Uncle Godfrey,' returned Gerard, losing patience at the old man's obstinacy. 'I think you ought to be satisfied if they marry gentlemen. The Lyalls are perfectly respectable.'

'So is Smedley respectable—indeed, I have the highest respect for him—but I should not be willing to admit him as a suitor for Doris.'

Then Gerard shrugged his shoulders in disgust. If his uncle Godfrey chose to place Dr. Lyall and his bailiff on the same level, there was little hope for the former.

'I don't see that we are so awfully grand as all that,' he said rebelliously.

Then Sir Godfrey's brow grew very black.

'I do not know what you mean by grandeur,' he said stiffly, 'but our family is a very old one. There was a Hamlyn who fought at Agincourt, and long before we got the baronetcy, more than one Hamlyn had been knighted for his valour and excellent service. We have never demeaned ourselves by marrying beneath us, until my daughter Clare chose to oppose me, and now my grand-daughter is following her example; but she shall rue it'—working himself up afresh—'unless she gives that fellow up, I will not

have her here! I will be master in my own house! I told your aunt Honoria so, and I mean it!'

'I don't believe you are serious, Uncle Godfrey.'

'Then I beg to tell you, sir, that I am perfectly serious.'

'No, no; the thing is not credible. No one turns people out of doors nowadays because they insist on marrying as they please. It is a trifle too mediæval, Uncle Godfrey; it is a little too gaudy and melodramatic to suit the nineteenth century. You will think better of it soon, and Gerda will come home all right.' Gerard enunciated this statement in a soothing voice. The old man was in a bad way; he must be cajoled, not threatened. Why, it was almost a case for a strait-waistcoat: gout and temper had been too much for him. 'Don't fret about it; you will soon feel differently,' he said with affectionate irony; and then he walked off, leaving the old man speechless with suppressed wrath.

Gerard paid a visit to the stables after this; then he got rid of his dust, and dressed himself for dinner. Now and then he wondered what Doris could be doing; he had an uneasy notion that the poor little girl was crying her eyes out somewhere. And then his thoughts reverted to Mrs. Hake's solemn warning: 'Take my advice, Mr. Hamlyn, and do not treat Doris as though she were still a child.'

'If only I could make out what she meant!' he thought, as he sat by the hall fire in the spring twilight, with Sultan at his feet.

Sultan wagged his tail rather lazily at that moment. The bearskin was soft and he was unwilling to move, but he was bound to acknowledge that light footstep. Gerard heard it, too; for the moment he could have believed it was Gerda's quiet tread. Doris generally ran down the stairs; she was brisk and nimble in her movements, and had not yet learnt that repose of manner that Sir Godfrey considered essential to a young gentlewoman's deportment.

Gerard found himself staring at her in surprise as she walked sedately round the screen, with her white gown flowing out behind her. Doris still looked pale, and her pretty eyes were swollen with crying, which, as she had spent the best part of an hour sobbing noiselessly into her pillow, was not a matter of surprise.

Gerard regarded her gravely; then he held out his hand.

'Haven't you forgiven me yet, Doey?'

'Oh, don't! don't, please!'

'Don't what?'—for she had not taken any notice of his outstretched hand, and now she had turned her back on him, and was looking at the fire with an air of deep depression —'what am I not to do?' He was going to say 'You goose!' but hastily substituted 'You foolish child!'

'Don't be kind to me; I cannot bear it!'

Gerard began to whistle. This was almost worse than Mrs. Hake's conundrum.

'No, you must not be kind, when I have been so dreadfully naughty. Oh, how could I, how could I have been so cross with you?' And now she commenced to sob afresh.

Gerard began to feel more cheerful. So this was what she meant. Well, she might be as penitent as she liked; it would only give him an opportunity to be magnanimous; he had never had a chance of forgiving her before. So he stepped up to her, and began stroking her soft curly hair in brotherly fashion; but to his surprise, she shrank away from him.

'Why, must I not do even that? Why, what on earth has come to you to-day, Doey? I can't make you out at all.' And then Mrs. Hake's singular paradox came into his mind: 'She is transparent, and yet she is deep.' He began to think she was deep.

'I can't understand myself,' she said tearfully; 'but I never, never meant to be so naughty. How could I have had the heart to be cross with you, when you are so unhappy? And I was only longing to comfort you!'

'All right,' returned Gerard cheerily; 'I am quite willing to be comforted, if you will only turn off those waterworks. Come and sit down, like a good girl, and I won't even offer to shake hands with you.' And then Doris allowed herself to be coaxed.

Gerard had only time to make his peace before the gong sounded and Sir Godfrey's measured footsteps were distinctly audible.

'I have forgiven you, you know,' he observed as they left the hall; 'but remember you are never to be cross with me again.' And Doris nodded assent.

During the long formal meal in which Sir Godfrey delighted, Gerard found himself watching Doris rather curiously. She reminded him a little of Gerda. Her face looked less round than usual, and, as she sat at the top of the table in girlish dignity, he thought she had never looked so pretty.

When Sir Godfrey had fallen into his usual evening doze, they had a comfortable talk in the hall. Gerard preferred it to the drawing-room; he could light his cigar and enjoy the companionship of his dogs. Only Mrs. Meredith's pug, Zoe, was allowed in any of the sitting-rooms. Sultan and Flip and Flop had each a corner in the hall.

The big swinging oil-lamp only made darkness visible, but there was always a wide circle of firelight; and this evening a flood of pale white moonlight streamed through Doris's favourite window. Gerard pronounced it awfully jolly, as he threw himself back on the great settle, while Doris, after a moment's hesitation, established herself cosily in the opposite corner. Flip and Flop were nothing but tight breathing balls, and Sultan had laid his nose between his paws, and regarded the pair with grave approbation.

The hour was propitious for confidences, and Gerard was soon unburdening himself; and this time he was not disappointed. Doris gave him all the sympathy he demanded without stint or limit.

'It must have been dreadful for you!' she exclaimed tearfully, when Gerard narrated his first visit to St. Jude's Vicarage.

'Well, it was not exactly the happiest moment of my life. I am afraid I cut up rather rough at first; it was so awfully sudden, you see. One has to get used to that sort of thing.' Then Doris's eyes were full of trouble.

'She has spoilt your life,' she said, clasping her little hands together, with almost tragical earnestness.

'Oh, I hope not! A life is a long time, don't you know.'

'But you will never get over it,' in a tone of intense conviction.

'Well, I won't go so far as that. Fellows always do get over it, you see.'

'Yes, but you are not quite like other people,' returned

Doris, gazing at him mournfully; a course of judicious novel reading, selected by her mother, had made her quite a connoisseur in love affairs. Not for worlds would she have allowed herself to believe that Gerard would ever be otherwise than blighted; of course he would pretend to be happy. In novels the despairing lover always puts a good face on his misery. 'Concealment, like a worm i' the bud,' would, of course, prey on his 'damask cheek.' In fact, Doris was a very sentimental and silly little girl.

Gerard felt half inclined to laugh outright, when she told him, with innocent gravity, that he was not quite like other people. He was anything but a hero in his own eyes. 'Of course fellows always get over it!' he had assured her with his usual sturdy honesty. Gerard hated humbug of all sorts; he declined to add to his very real heartache and misery by piling on fictitious agony. He liked Doris to sentimentalize over him, she did it so prettily; but he would have scorned to take her speeches too literally.

'I hope you mean to like your new brother-in-law,' he said presently. Then Doris drew down the corners of her lips. 'He is a capital fellow, Doey.'

'Yes, I know; and, of course, I was very grateful to him for saving Gerda's life. But—but——'

'You need not be afraid of speaking out. I am not too fond of him;' and Gerard smiled a little grimly.

'He is not exactly the brother I wanted,' she returned, after a moment's hesitation. 'I feel as though I could never be fond of him. He always seems as though he is laughing at one; and then he is so dreadfully clever. I think I am afraid of very clever people.'

'Well, Gerda is clever, you know.'

'Yes, but somehow her cleverness does not seem to matter. But I am always uncomfortable when a person looks at me as though he were trying to find out all my thoughts. Oh, I can't explain it! but I always feel so young and insignificant when Dr. Lyall talks to me as though I were not quite grown up.'

'I should try and get over that feeling if I were you; it is rather rough on Gerda.'

Doris opened her eyes at this.

'One must do as one would be done by, don't you see,

returned Gerard, as he lighted another cigarette, for he felt Doris rather needed a word of caution. Her warm partisanship made her a little hard on Dr. Lyall. 'Of course Gerda wants you to like him.'

'Well, I don't exactly dislike him.'

'Oh, but you must love him, you know! Girls are always fond of their brothers-in-law. Gerda will expect it. Why, one day she will have a brother-in-law, too. I mean'—as Doris seemed puzzled by this—'that you will be marrying yourself one of these days.' Gerard spoke in simple good faith, and without any *arrière pensée*. He thought Doris needed a mild fraternal lecture, but her reply took him somewhat by surprise.

'Oh no, no! I shall do nothing of the kind. You must not say that.' And Doris coloured almost painfully; even her pretty little shell-like ears were pink. 'That will never happen,' she went on hurriedly, stooping to caress Sultan, who was evidently suffering from an uneasy dream, 'never, never!'

Now it was not Doris's fault if a sudden strange thought came into Gerard's mind at that moment. Certain vividly wise thoughts will leap into existence, like Minerva newborn from the head of Jove, when there seems no adequate reason for them.

Doris meant nothing by her girlish protest. She had long ago got it into her head that she would be an old maid.

'You see, I am not pretty,' she had said more than once to Gerda. 'No one will care for such a silly little thing;' for she was singularly humble-minded, and had no self-admiration.

But it was not likely that Gerard would comprehend this excessive modesty. To his chivalrous English nature every girl had a right to be loved. It was small wonder, then, that he entirely misunderstood Doris's little speech, and that he should ponder somewhat heavily on the real reason for this sudden dislike to matrimony. Was it possible that Doris cared for someone who she knew would never ask her to marry him? Did she wish to remain single rather than listen to any other man? 'None are so blind as those who will not see.' 'Oh, by Jove, that is impossible!'

'What is impossible?' asked Doris innocently, as she patted Sultan. But Gerard did not immediately answer.

Presently he observed that it was getting late, and that he must take the dogs for a run. He forgot to bid Doris good-night, however, and he left his cigarette case on the settle. Doris thought he would come back for it, and waited up for more than an hour. But he did not return, so she went off to bed a little sadly. Gerard had never forgotten to say good-night to her before.

The next fortnight passed delightfully to Doris. In her opinion Gerard was nicer than ever. He was very busy, for a great deal of business always passed through the young Squire's hands; but he generally found time to ride with her, and in the evening, while Sir Godfrey dozed, they had a chat by the hall fire.

But he never again alluded to his trouble, either directly or indirectly. And once, when Doris began to speak of it, he checked her kindly but decidedly.

'We will let it drop, Doey,' he said. 'That sort of thing does not pay. I have bored you quite enough, only you are too good to say so. But for the future we will keep our talk to pleasanter topics.' And then he asked her on which evening they were all to dine at Braeside.

Doris felt vaguely troubled at Gerard's sudden strength of mind. She liked her position of confidante too well to relinquish it without regret. Why should he think she was bored?—but she was too timid to assert herself, or to contradict him. So Gerard had his way, and his unhappy love affair was buried decently out of sight.

Mrs. Hake found Mr. Hamlyn somewhat stiff on the night of her dinner-party. It was one of her 'house parties,' as she called them, and no one but the Hall people were invited to meet the guests who were staying at Braeside.

On this evening it consisted of a certain Honourable Mrs. Everdean and her son and daughter. Constantia Everdean was considered a great beauty, and it was supposed that a certain elderly nobleman, very high in the political world, was much smitten with her. Her brother, who was in the Hussars, was a handsome fellow, too, and Mrs. Hake considered them quite the *crême de la crême* of her acquaintance.

Sir Godfrey made himself very pleasant to Mrs. Everdean. She was a small, flimsy woman, with half-closed blue eyes, and a sweet, drawling voice, and it was understood by those who watched her closely that she was not one of those widows whom St. Paul called 'widows indeed.'

Gerard took in Miss Everdean to dinner, and was much amused by her facility of conversation and her eye-play. Constantia always focussed her victims before she talked to them, and she generally talked politics. In fact, one of her discarded lovers once humorously called her 'The Leading Article,' but that was before the brilliancy of her eyes had extinguished him. Doris and Captain Everdean were their *vis-à-vis*, and before the first course was over, Gerard became aware that Captain Everdean—Lewis, as his mother called him—was bent on making himself agreeable to his cousin.

Doris looked very nice this evening—Mrs. Hake told her so as she kissed her. A long ride across country had given her a colour, and the clear brightness of her eyes and the little dimple in her soft cheek excited Captain Everdean's admiration. He was rather a susceptible young fellow, and was much given to falling into love somewhat suddenly.

'I declare that puppy is trying to get up a flirtation with her,' thought Gerard disgustedly; and then he caught Mrs. Hake's eye and stiffened slowly. Strange to say, he was rather put out with his good-tempered hostess, which was, to say the least, unreasonable and ungrateful. He accused her secretly of putting notions into his head of which he could not rid himself; he felt vaguely as though she were fooling him.

'Did you speak to me, Mr. Hamlyn?' she asked graciously. 'Constantia, my love, please do not refuse that *entrée*, or Lionel will never forgive you. It is his own recipe—the result of his own inspiration. When I give a dinner-party his first question is, "Have you put 'Benjamin's mess' into the *menu*?"'

'I think I would give it a more tempting name,' returned Constantia, as she helped herself to the delicacy. 'Is not the *menu* a daily trial, Mrs. Hake? I tell mamma if I ever marry I will insist on a good housekeeper. I have no genius for housekeeping.'

'I am quite sure, dearest, that you may insist on any-

thing,' returned Mrs. Everdean, with a trifle too much meaning in her tone; for Constantia knitted her brows in rather an annoyed fashion, and began to talk to Gerard about the complication on the Continent.

'Are you staying long?' asked Doris cheerfully, as Captain Everdean began praising the neighbourhood, and hinted his wish to explore Chesterton Park. 'Mother is coming back next week, and then you must bring your sister to luncheon, and we will show you the Hall and the Park;' and Captain Everdean accepted this invitation rather eagerly.

'There is no need to wait until Aunt Honoria comes back if you want those people here,' observed Gerard, as they exchanged a few words by the hall fire that night; 'we will ask them to luncheon, and Mrs. Hake will make it all right. And we could have the washed-out little lady as well.'

Doris looked up; she was a trifle disturbed at Gerard's tone.

'Thank you; but there is no hurry, is there? Mrs. Hake rather wants us to ask them, I know; she said something about it to-night. She always likes her friends to come to the Hall; but I think it would be better to wait until mother comes home.'

'Oh, just as you like; but I thought you might want a little more life. It must be rather dull with only Uncle Godfrey and me.'

Then Doris stared at him in amazement.

'Dull! I am never dull, Gerard; at least'—her conscience pricking her—'I am not dull when you are at home;' and Doris spoke with convincing earnestness.

'All right, then, we will wait for Aunt Honoria.'

But he coloured a little as he spoke, and the subject dropped.

But before many days had passed Doris found the matter taken out of her hands. Captain Everdean simply haunted the Hall. He had conceived a sudden fancy for Mr. Hamlyn's company; he invited him to walk or to fish with him, he smoked endless pipes in Gerard's den, and more than once Doris was inveigled into helping them both tie flies. When Mrs. Meredith returned she was rather aghast at the

position of affairs. Before she had taken off her bonnet her father told her in a voice of pompous good-humour that Doris had a beau.

'It is Lewis Everdean. You know Mrs. Everdean; nice little woman. Her daughter is a fine creature; takes after old Everdean. He was a handsome fellow. Mrs. Everdean tells me that Lord Brooklyn will propose to her without doubt, only she is not quite sure what the girl will say to him. Nice people, very; only not rich. The son is in the Hussars. He has struck up with Gerard; but, of course, I see through it, and Mrs. Hake sees through it, too.'

'Oh dear, oh dear! I hope you are mistaken, father,' returned Mrs. Meredith. The poor woman was loath to part with another daughter. 'Doris is too young to be married.'

'Too young!' observed Sir Godfrey scornfully. 'Pooh, my dear; I married your mother when she was eighteen. That little puss is playing her cards very skilfully; gives him no encouragement—does not seem to see it, and that tickles his vanity and eggs him on. Mark my words, Honoria, she will be married before her sister.'

'Do you mean that you approve of Captain Everdean?' asked Mrs. Meredith helplessly.

'I do not see how I am to disapprove,' replied Sir Godfrey. 'The Everdeans are one of our oldest families, and they are well connected all the way round.'

'But I thought you told me that they were not rich?'

'No; but one cannot expect everything, and they are young enough to wait. And, of course, if Doris marries suitably—marries suitably,' drawing himself up, 'I shall see what I can do for her.'

Mrs. Meredith expressed her gratitude in her usual dutiful way, and then she pleaded fatigue and got out of the room. On her way through the hall she came upon Gerard. He looked a trifle sulky.

'That fellow is in there,' jerking his head in the direction of the drawing-room.

'My dear, what fellow do you mean?' she asked, in vague alarm.

'Oh, Everdean, of course! He's always about the place; he was here all yesterday. We were potting rabbits together

in the south field all the morning, and then Uncle Godfrey asked him to luncheon, and we were playing billiards all the afternoon.'

'Don't you like him, Gerard?'

'Oh yes, I like him well enough—he is a good companion, and all that—but I could dispense with his company sometimes.'

'Your uncle thinks—but I am sure I hope not—that he admires my little Doris.'

'Of course he admires her; anyone can see that. But you don't seem pleased, Aunt Honoria. He is rather a catch in Uncle Godfrey's eyes—dates somewhere from the Conquest, you know.' And Gerard's tone was slightly ironical.

'Oh dear! oh dear!' sighed Mrs. Meredith. 'What is the good of having children if one must lose them? Doris is too young for this sort of thing.'

'You are making a mistake,' returned Gerard coolly. 'Take my advice, Aunt Honoria, and do not treat Doris as though she were still a child.'

Gerard was repeating Mrs. Hake's speech with parrot-like precision, but Mrs. Meredith looked mildly surprised.

'I think Doris is younger than most girls of her age,' she said quietly.

'Then you do not consider her deep?'

'Deep! Are you out of your senses, Gerard? My dear boy, whoever has put such an absurd notion into your head? She is perfectly natural and simple.'

'Oh, I dare say you are right. I don't profess to understand girls; but I suppose that fellow has had his innings long enough.'

And then Mrs. Meredith woke up to the fact that she was neglecting her maternal duties.

CHAPTER XXXVI

CAPTAIN EVERDEAN GETS HIS CONGÉ.

'We have all sufficient strength to support the misfortunes of others.'—*Thoughts of a Queen.*

Doris was delighted to have her mother back.

'Grand has been as nice as possible, especially lately,' she observed, as they indulged in a twilight chat. Captain Everdean had carried off Gerard. Mrs. Hake wanted him to fill up a gap in her dinner-table, and Gerard had agreed with his usual good-nature.

'I am glad they have gone,' she continued comfortably; 'I wanted to have you all to myself to-night. Captain Everdean is very pleasant—and of course Gerard is glad to get a companion—but he comes here rather often.'

Mrs. Meredith breathed a sigh of relief. Doris was still heart-whole. She had watched her very narrowly during the last half-hour, and nothing could have exceeded the girl's utter unconsciousness. 'She takes his attentions quite as a matter of course,' thought the anxious mother. 'She did not seem to notice that he never stirred from her side if he could help it. And really there is no fault to find with him. He is very good-looking, and as nice as possible.'

'And so Gerda is tremendously happy?' began Doris, when she had entered this mild protest against Captain Everdean's frequent visits.

And Mrs. Meredith at once owned that this was the case.

'Dr. Lyall suits her perfectly; she seems utterly and

entirely satisfied with him.' And then she stopped, and after a minute added abruptly, 'I like him very much.'

'Really and truly, mammy?' And Doris arched her eyebrows in surprise.

'Yes, dear; I am sure he is a thoroughly good man, and if only your grandfather could be brought to consent to the marriage, I should be quite happy about it.'

Doris smiled; she knew her mother was an easy convert. Dr. Lyall and Gerda had of course coaxed and wheedled her round to their side. She was quite aware her future brother-in-law was a good man; she had no fault to find with his principles. As Gerard's rival he had not found favour in her eyes, but she smothered this unworthy feeling.

'What will they do if Grand be inexorable?' she asked.

'Oh, we held a family council on that point; your aunt Clare and uncle Horace were both present. Your uncle Horace seemed to agree with everything Dr. Lyall said.'

'And what was the result of the talk?' Then Mrs. Meredith sighed a little heavily.

'They want me to insist on Gerda's coming home, as though I could insist on anything. Do you know, your grandfather has never even mentioned Gerda's name! I think he has made up his mind to ignore the whole thing. He asked after your aunt Clare, and if she had heard from Walter, and then he talked about you.'

'About me, mammy?' And Doris opened her eyes rather widely at this.

'Yes, about you, and things in general,' returned her mother hastily. She was annoyed at the slip she had made. 'I think he talked of everything except Gerda, and I call that a bad sign.'

'So do I; but all the same, we must have our poor darling home.'

'I think I shall get Gerard to talk to him. I have simply no influence with your grandfather. I have given in to him so much all my life, that he resents it if I venture to contradict him. Your aunt Clare is almost dreading her visit to us; she is so sure that he will receive her coolly.'

'I think Grand is very tiresome and disagreeable.'

'I am afraid he will never bring himself to agree to the marriage. You see, Dr. Lyall wants to have the wedding in

September. He says a doctor ought to marry as soon as possible, and that a long engagement will not suit him. He was quite hurt when Gerda suggested that they might wait at least another year.'

'I think Gerda should hardly have said that.'

'Well, she is so happy that she would be quite content to go on for a long time as they are doing now; but Dr. Lyall holds a different opinion. He asked her reproachfully if she thought that Pamela made him so comfortable that he would be willing to wait for his wife. He was evidently quite sore, and then of course Gerda gave in. She told me afterwards that it was the first time their wills had clashed, and that she was dreadfully penitent for having hurt him.'

'Do you think he is quite nice-tempered, mammie?'

'My dear, his temper is remarkably even; but he is very much in love, and of course he feels himself badly treated by your grandfather. I like him all the better for his unwillingness to wait.'

'Well, perhaps so;' but Doris said this rather grudgingly.

'Gerda asked her uncle's advice at last, and he told her that in his opinion her mother's consent was quite sufficient. "If your grandfather chooses to be unreasonable, there is no need to submit to absolute tyranny. Give him a little time to think over things, and then, if he still refuses to recognise your engagement, you must be married from St. Jude's Vicarage."'

'That was very kind of uncle Horace.'

'My dear, he *is* kind; he is anxious to do everything he can to help them; but as I told your aunt Clare, where am I to get money for Gerda's trousseau?' Then Doris looked extremely serious. In her opinion the trousseau was a very necessary appendage of matrimony.

'I am afraid poor Gerda must wear her old gowns,' she said sorrowfully; but Mrs. Meredith would not hear of this.

'You are as bad as your aunt Clare,' she said reproachfully; 'she and Dr. Lyall both scoffed at the idea of a trousseau. "I had to do without one," she said in her quick way; "but Horace never found fault with my old gowns," and Dr. Lyall was worse, for he declared that he would be better pleased if Gerda's gowns were shabby enough to match his house.'

'Oh dear, oh dear! and Gerda is so fond of pretty things; she has never had a shabby frock in her life.'

'And she shall not have one now, if I can prevent it; and then, with a soft flush on her faded cheek, Mrs. Meredith confided to her daughter that if their grandfather remained obdurate she had made up her mind to sell her jewels. 'They will fetch a good sum,' she said, with feminine pride. 'There is the diamond and sapphire parure that Lord Galveston gave me on our wedding-day; and then your grandfather made me so many presents.'

'But, mammie darling, you will not like to part with all your lovely things! And what will Roberts say?'

'I must not think about Roberts or anyone else, when my poor child needs everything I can give her. I told your aunt Clare about it, and she agreed with me that it was the only thing to do. Of course, I am sorry about it,' went on Mrs. Meredith sadly. 'I meant to give that parure to Gerda on her wedding-day, but it would be no use to her now; a doctor's wife need not wear diamonds.'

'Is he so dreadfully poor as all that?' asked Doris in affright.

'Well, he has a few hundreds for a rainy day, as he says. I am sure he explained everything very minutely. He told me that but for this reserve fund he would not think of marrying. "I live up to my income now," he said. "I have heavy professional expenses; and then there are Hester's boys. For the first year or so I may have to dip into my little capital, but you need not be afraid of that. If my health be spared, I shall soon increase my practice; and it will not hurt us to be careful for the first two or three years. Gerda tells me she does not mind, and I am too willing to take her at her word."'

'I wish—I do wish that she were not going to be so dreadfully poor,' sighed Doris. She was not particularly worldly-minded, and thought little of wealth in the abstract, but she had been delicately nurtured, and an existence where one could not wear pretty fresh gowns, and where a carriage on rainy days would be an unattainable luxury, seemed somewhat forlorn and intolerable.

Gerda's future, as Mrs. Meredith painted it then and afterwards, seemed strangely undesirable to Doris's eyes.

The narrow, high house, with its shabby furniture; the crowded thoroughfare and noisy traffic; the absence of country freshness and country pleasures, made up a distasteful whole to Doris.

'She must like him tremendously to put up with it,' was her mental summing up; and when she retired to bed that night, she questioned herself rather seriously.

Was she very worldly and selfish to care so much for nice things? Could she, if she liked anyone very much, gave them up as happily as Gerda was doing?

Gerda was facing her future life with wonderful serenity; she was perfectly frank with her mother.

'Alick is very particular about accounts,' she said once. 'I shall have to account for every penny. He will give me very little housekeeping money, and I shall have to make it do. If I can save a sixpence, I shall spend it in flowers. Alick is so fond of flowers, and Pamela never buys any. She declares there is never a penny to spare.' And Mrs. Meredith had repeated this speech to Doris.

'I wonder what it would be like, living in a town?' thought Doris, running her fingers through her curly hair; 'only to see flowers in shops? for Roadside has only a long slip of garden, and Pamela has never planted even a snowdrop. No tennis—at least, I don't know, perhaps they do play tennis in Cromehurst—but certainly no delicious rides and drives in Gerard's dog-cart; no delightful run across the park with the dear dogs; and no cross old Reynolds to coax for the key of the hot-houses, or for the finest bunch of black grapes, when one is hot or thirsty. And then there are the peaches and the nectarines on the south wall, and the nutting in the copse with Gerard and the Rectory boys, not to mention blackberrying, and gipsy-teas on Juniper Hill, and a thousand other delightful things. I could not imagine myself in a small poky house,' she went on, 'adding up sixpences, and wondering how long the cold mutton would last. It seems such an ugly sort of life; and yet——' And here a soft, shy look came in the blue eyes, and she got up from her seat a little abruptly. Doris never finished the sentence, even to herself. She turned her thoughts hurriedly in another direction. Did something whisper to the girl that, after all, Gerda was right? that the meanest dwelling and the most prosaic life might be

illumined and glorified by the presence of the beloved object? that even shabby furniture and old gowns might sink into insignificance, when one lives the higher spiritual life that love in its truest shape offers to its votaries? that even puerile hindrances and small opposing circumstances might be regarded as favourable opportunities for blissful self-sacrifice?

'Depend upon it, Eve made herself happy out of paradise,' whispered the insistent voice. 'And until the end of time her daughters will make themselves happy, too;' and somehow from that time Doris ceased to pity Gerda.

Gerard's brief sulkiness soon vanished; he was far too easy-tempered to bear malice because another man chose to admire his little Doris.

'I am not quite such an ass as that,' he said to himself; 'I always thought the dog in the manger a pitiable sort of cur.' But, in spite of these salutary reflections, he felt rather out in the cold.

From babyhood Doris had been his pet and plaything; she had run his errands, fetched and carried for him, and fagged for him in her childish way.

To be sure, manhood and Oxford had taught him better manners, and he had insisted that it was now his turn to wait upon her. But Doris, who loved all feminine ministry, could not always be brought to see this, so she dusted Gerard's books, and arranged his heterogeneous lumber, and was his devoted slave as much as ever.

Gerard felt much as Sultan would have done if another big dog had proposed to help him gnaw his bone. He rather longed to show his teeth and offer fight, but somehow hospitality and a British love of fair play forbade this. So he contented himself with a grand display of magnanimity when Captain Everdean appeared on the scene. He effaced himself as much as possible, and cleared his decks for the enemy.

One lovely afternoon in April, about a week after Mrs. Meredith's return home, Gerard ordered his mare, and set off for a long solitary ride to an outlying farm that had lately come into Sir Godfrey's possession, and which threatened to become a white elephant.

Gerard was not in a happy mood; nothing seemed to go right just now. Mrs. Meredith had summoned up courage to speak to her father about Gerda's return, and had been

severely snubbed and routed; and when Gerard had come to the rescue he had met with no better success.

'I must beg you never to mention the subject to me again, Gerard,' he had returned with frigid dignity.

'My dear uncle,' had been Gerard's warm answer, 'I suppose you do not expect me to sit down quietly, when my cousin is subjected to this injustice. The thing is intolerable!'

'It is, at all events, no matter for discussion between us,' replied Sir Godfrey stiffly. 'I must request you to mind your own business, Gerard, and to leave me to deal with my grand-daughter;' and he had refused to utter another word.

'What is one to do with such a pompous old lunatic?' was Gerard's irreverent comment on this; and then he told Mrs. Meredith curtly that Gerda had better stop where she was, and that, after all, the wedding would be from St. Jude's Vicarage.

'I do believe Uncle Godfrey's brain is softening,' he observed seriously. 'There is no method in his madness; it is either obstinacy or disease.'

Gerard was not sorry, for his own sake, that Gerda would be absent from the Hall; her presence would only have complicated matters and made his position more difficult. No intercourse, however friendly, could bridge over the gulf that yawned between them.

'She is nothing to me, now,' he thought bitterly; 'she can never be anything to me again.'

Captain Everdean was expected that afternoon; he had undertaken some commission for Mrs. Meredith, which would require a good deal of explanation. Mrs. Everdean and Constantia had left Braeside, and were paying a round of visits in Derbyshire. Brooklyn Park was in that county, and it was supposed that Mrs. Everdean had timed her visit to that neighbourhood with some degree of accuracy, and that Lord Brooklyn would be at his ancestral seat during the Easter recess.

Lewis Everdean was still the Hakes' guest; both Captain Hake and his wife had pressed him to remain.

'There is no need for you to go back to London,' Mrs. Hake had observed; 'and your mother is too much engrossed with Constantia to give you any attention.' And, after a little hesitation, Lewis had consented to remain.

It was somewhat late when Gerard threw the reins over his mare's neck, and allowed her to find her way to the stables, while he crossed the lawn, and took the short cut through the shrubberies to the Hall.

As he passed the oriel window, he caught sight of Doris on the window-seat. He was just going to tap upon the glass by way of friendly recognition, but something in her attitude arrested his attention. In his own phrase, 'she seemed all in a heap,' and she had her hands before her face, as though she were crying.

'I wonder what on earth has happened!' he thought, as he contemplated this woe-begone picture; and then he walked briskly round to the front-door, and made his way to the window-seat.

'What is the matter, Doey?' he asked kindly.

But Doris only looked up at him with miserable eyes, and hid her face again.

'It is too dreadful! I can't tell you!' she sobbed.

'Oh yes, you can,' he returned, sitting down beside her, and speaking in a coaxing voice. 'We tell each other everything, don't we, dear? You know all about my troubles, so of course I have a right to know yours; so fire away, there's a good child!'

'Oh, Gerard, I could not! You do not know—you could not guess——'

'Oh yes, I can,' he retorted cheerfully. 'I am pretty sharp; and there are some things that any fool could see. I would wager you anything that it is about Everdean that you are crying.'

Then Doris started.

'He has been and gone and done it,' he went on. 'Well, anyone could see that was his little game. Well, am I to congratulate or condole with him?'

'Oh, please, please don't laugh about it, Gerard; it is too dreadful! He has gone away so angry. He says that it is all my fault—that I have encouraged him; but I never, never thought of such a thing!' And Doris fell to weeping again.

'Do you mean that you did not see the poor beggar had fallen in love with you?' and Gerard's tone expressed his surprise.

'I never dreamt of such a thing for a moment. I thought he was very nice and kind; but how could I know that he only came to see me? I am afraid I have been very stupid, but—but he ought not to have said that I flirted with him.'

'Do you mean he was such an awful cad as to say that?'

'Well, he did not say it in so many words, but he somehow implied it. He said no one could have misunderstood his meaning, that he showed it far too plainly, and that I always seemed glad to see him. He made me feel somehow that I had treated him badly.'

'Oh, you must take all that with a grain of salt'—for Gerard began to feel more kindly to Captain Everdean. 'He is not a bad fellow; I rather like him; but his disappointment made him a little sore.'

'But he had no right to make me unhappy, too,' returned Doris in an injured voice. 'I only wanted to be nice to him, because I thought he was your friend, and mother was not at home. It is not my fault if he chose to be silly.'

'I don't think that is the right word, Doey. I must say Everdean showed rattling good sense in falling in love with you.' Then Doris blushed very prettily. 'Don't fret about it any more; he'll get over it all right.'

'Are you quite sure of that, Gerard?'

'Cocksure. I can't say more than that.'

And then Doris laughed a little hysterically, for there was a joke implied in this; and then she said a little pleadingly:

'You won't tell Grand, will you?'

'By Jove! no. We'll keep it dark.'

'Of course mother must know. I am afraid she will be very shocked; she always says I am so terribly young for my age.'

'Well, that is better than being deep; but you must be sharper next time.'

And Doris heaved a profound sigh, and promised to do her best. Somehow she felt less heartbroken after this talk with Gerard. He did not seem to think her so much to blame, after all, and he had comforted her so nicely.

Gerard was in excellent spirits that evening, and kept them all alive; but once, when he found himself alone with Mrs. Meredith, he spoke a word of caution.

'I hope you are not vexed with Doris for refusing Captain

Everdean?' he said seriously. And Mrs. Meredith was obliged to confess that she felt some measure of relief.

'It is very selfish of me,' she added, 'for I am sure he is as nice as possible.'

'Yes, but he was not Mr. Right, you see,' observed Gerard shrewdly. 'Aunt Honoria, if I were you, I would keep this dark with Uncle Godfrey.'

'My dear, it will be extremely difficult; he is always talking to me about Captain Everdean.'

'All the same, you had better take my advice. There are rows enough on hand already.' And then he walked off to find Doris.

The next day Mrs. Hake called at the Hall, and in the course of conversation she mentioned to Mrs. Meredith that they had lost their guest.

'Lewis had a telegram from his mother this morning,' she said. 'Constantia has accepted Lord Brooklyn. He was to join them directly, so after luncheon he decamped, luggage and all. Lionel seemed vexed about it, but I fancy he has stayed long enough, and that he was beginning to feel bored.' And here she looked full at Doris.

That evening, as Gerard was correcting some accounts in the study, he retailed Mrs. Hake's news.

'Gone, has he?' observed Sir Godfrey with a start of surprise. 'That is rather sudden, is it not?' And then he remarked with some displeasure that he had never said good-bye to them.

'Oh, I believe he sent some message by Mrs. Hake. Shall I add up this column, Uncle Godfrey?'

'Never mind; we shall have him back again,' returned Sir Godfrey with an air of satisfaction. 'That child has turned his head. I never saw a fellow so smitten.'

But Gerard made no reply to this. He only pointed out that the gong would soon sound, and that Smedley's accounts had not yet been verified; and at this very broad hint Sir Godfrey consented to drop the subject.

CHAPTER XXXVII

A TAP AT THE WINDOW

'The weakest hand can open a floodgate to drown a country, which a thousand cannot stop.'—DEAN SWIFT.

ABOUT a fortnight after Mrs. Meredith's return to the Hall, Dr. Lyall was sitting alone in his study one night. His account-books were before him, but he had not yet opened them. His thoughts were busy recalling sundry words that had been spoken that evening. Gerda and her aunt had dined at Roadside, and when the meal had ended he had persuaded Gerda to go with him on a tour of inspection through the house, and to suggest any changes that she might consider desirable.

Gerda had been somewhat impracticable at first. She begged in a distressed tone that nothing should be done. 'What is good enough for Pamela is surely good enough for me,' she pleaded, and it had taken a great deal of coaxing and quiet determination on his part to induce her to suggest any alteration.

'It can all be done afterwards,' she observed as they stood together in the study. It was a long, narrow room, with a window at either end, and they were looking out at the bare little slip of garden, with some lilac bushes and an old green bench, and a small, untidy-looking lawn. 'I am very fond of gardening, and I think Pamela and I could make this look pretty.'

'I should not advise you to depend on Pamela,' had been

his answer. 'I think you will find me more dependable, and I shall be quite willing to work under orders.'

'That will be nice,' she returned simply. 'But, Alick, I do wish you would leave everything else until—until——'

'Well?' he said, smiling, 'I am waiting for you to finish that sentence.'

'Oh, you know what I mean'—with a pretty blush. 'I do not want you to spend money unnecessarily. A little whitewash and a fresh paper or two will be all that need be done. But you must not be extravagant and talk about new carpets.'

'But, my darling, I must have things nice for you.'

'They will be nice—they are nice,' she said quickly. 'Alick, I do wish you would understand that all this matters little to me. If the carpets are shabby I shall not notice them. My mind will be full of other things.'

'But, dearest, even Mrs Glyn owned that the stair carpets were dreadfully worn. You see, I took them from the last tenants, and they cheated us shamefully.'

'They will do a little longer,' she returned tranquilly. 'Indeed, I am perfectly serious. If we are to be poor we must not pretend to be rich and buy all we want. It will be such a pleasure to do things by degrees, to make this room nice, for example;' and she looked round the room with critical eyes. 'Yes, I am sure that I could make this far more comfortable without spending anything. The furniture is good; that carved oak cabinet is beautiful, but it is quite lost in that dark corner.'

'It shall be moved to-morrow,' he returned, pleased at her admiration. And then he drew her towards him and kissed her. 'You are very unselfish, dearest. If I promise to carry out your wishes, and to let things remain as they are until we can do them together, will you be content?'

'Utterly content,' and Gerda raised her clear eyes to his face. 'It has troubled me all the evening, listening to you and Aunt Clare. I wanted you so badly to understand me. Nothing could make me happier than I am now; I want nothing changed—nothing!'

'It shall be as you wish, my own,' had been his moved response, and for a few moments there had been silence between them.

What had he done, he was asking himself, to win this pure girlish heart? He was almost afraid to tell her how he worshipped her for her simplicity and unworldliness—how few girls would have been so absolutely unselfish! In her gentle way she wanted him to know that she cared for nothing but for him — himself. He understood vaguely that she would be more grateful to him for taking her at her word, than if he had persisted in refurnishing Roadside from attic to basement. The outlay would have wounded her innate love of truth. 'If we are poor, we must live as poor people,' she had said to him more than once quite seriously; and with much tact he had refrained from even a smile of amusement.

'It shall be the object of my life to give her all she wants,' he had thought, while that eloquent silence fell between them. It was Gerda who broke it at last.

'Thank you for being so good to me,' she said, putting her hand in his. 'It is such a rest to feel that you will never misunderstand me. All my life I have wanted someone who could thoroughly understand me.'

'Do not fear; I know you thoroughly. My wife will be no stranger to me. Sometimes I think I can read your very thoughts.'

'I am not afraid,' she replied, smiling. 'But, Alick, it is late, and Aunt Clare will be getting tired;' and then he had roused himself reluctantly.

But he had walked with them to St. Jude's Vicarage, and there had been a few more parting words in the moonlight. Somehow he seemed strangely reluctant to say good-night, and at last she had made a movement to leave him.

'You must not keep me any longer, Alick. I shall see you to-morrow evening.'

'Do you know that there are four months before the twenty-fifth of September?' had been his irrelevant answer. 'I wish now I had stipulated for July; I think I could have persuaded your mother. I wonder if it be possible to alter it now.'

'I will not stay to hear another word,' she had returned; but at the top of the steps she lingered to wave her hand to him. 'Good-night! it has been such a happy evening;' and then at last he had consented to close the gate.

No, it was no use; he could not bring himself to any mundane business. The moonlight and love's intoxication had filled his veins; he felt the joyousness and energy of youth.

'Am I really thirty-three?' he said to himself; 'have I actually been working body and brain for the last twelve years? A few months ago I was a sober-minded, harassed being. Between me and youth there was a great gulf fixed; and now I am rejuvenated. I feel light-hearted and sanguine. God bless her dear heart for trusting me so implicitly!'

Dr. Lyall would have continued these reflections until midnight, but he was suddenly disturbed by a quick, peremptory tap at his window. He started violently. The blind was down, but someone had evidently perceived that his light was burning. The act displeased him, and he resolved to take no notice. If his patients wanted him the bell was at hand; but to his surprise the tapping was repeated. It was even more peremptory—it demanded immediate attention.

'I shall give that person a piece of my mind,' he thought, as he opened the street door. But his annoyance changed to amazement as a tall, thin figure stepped hastily into the hall, and motioned to him to close the door. 'Hester!' he exclaimed.

But she held up her hand as though to admonish him to silence.

'Hush, wait until we are in the study!' she whispered. 'I do not want Pamela to know that I am here;' and then he closed the door, and followed her into the room.

'Is that why you tapped at the window?' he asked. 'It was rather startling, I assure you. Why have you come so late?—it is past eleven. Is Ray worse?'

But she shook her head.

'She is no worse.'

'Good heavens! what is it, Essie? You look dreadful.'

He might well say so. Hester's face was drawn and haggard; there was no colour even in her lips, and her eyes had a dead, opaque look. Dr. Lyall felt instinctively that she had suffered some shock; there was a curious stiffening of the features—a sort of rigidity, as though hope had suddenly failed.

'Has Julius met with some accident?' he asked.

But Hester shook her head again, and moved to the fireplace as though she were chilly. The action filled him with anxiety. Surely she noticed that the fire was unlighted! He needed none this warm night. But no—she spread her hands over the black coals, and held them in that posture.

'You are cold; I will put a match to it directly. But you must sit down first.'

He pushed the chair towards her as he spoke; but she took no notice. Her thoughts were evidently engrossed by some painful subject; so he put his arm round her with gentle compulsion.

'You must sit down; you are not fit to stand. Wait until I have struck a match, and then I will talk to you;' and so saying, he knelt down on the rug and watched until the sound of the crackling wood told him that the fire was burning.

Hester watched his movements half unconsciously, and again she stretched out her hands as though desirous of warmth. But her brother took possession of them.

'You will be warm soon. If you shiver any more I must fetch you some wine. Tell me what has frightened you. If Julius and the children are well, I cannot imagine what has put you into such a state.'

'They are all well.'

'Are you ill yourself?'

'No; not bodily ill.'

'I could have told you that, but I want to make you speak. You look as though you had seen a ghost, Essie. Why have you come to me?'

'Because Julius made me come.'

'Not of your own accord?'

Then her features became less rigid, and she tried to release her hands; but he held them fast. Perhaps he knew that that warm, firm clasp was unconsciously soothing her.

'He was cruel to send me! I did not want to come,' she said almost fiercely.

Then he reflected over her words a moment.

'Let me think. It is not easy to make you speak, and yet you have always told me your troubles. Why are you afraid to trust me now?'

'It was cruel to make me tell you this,' was her only answer.

'Let me be the judge of that. Julius is selfish, but he has not a bad heart. You had better tell me, Essie.'

'I cannot tell you what I do not know. I do not understand it myself. There was a knock at the door this evening, and as Martha was out, I opened it, and a man slipped in. He said he was a bailiff.'

'A bailiff?'

'He said so. I went into the studio and told Julius, and he turned very pale, and swore at the man; but that did no good, and then Julius shut himself up in the studio.'

'Go on;' for she paused here. She had said these few sentences in a dry, listless way, as though she were repeating a lesson she had been compelled to learn. 'Go on; I must know more than this.'

'Julius must tell you, then. I do not understand—I thought we owed nothing. The man was civil. He seemed sorry for me; he said he would give as little trouble as possible; that his employers were obliged to put in an execution for the furniture; that they could not get their money.'

'What was the sum?'

'You must ask Julius.'

'I prefer to ask you—Julius's statements are rather misleading. Let me know the amount and the name of the creditor.'

'It will do no good.'

'Hester, I insist on knowing.'

He spoke sternly, almost angrily, but he intended to be obeyed.

'It was for things he wanted—colours and canvas. It is over a hundred pounds.'

'Good heavens!'

'But that is only one; there are others; he says he forgot. But he can have paid for nothing all these years. He owes his tailor, and for all the furniture in the studio; and he has borrowed money, put his name to some bill—but I do not understand. All I know is that we are ruined. Julius has ruined me and my children,' she finished, with a short, tearless sob, as though the words choked her.

Dr. Lyall was silent. He dared not trust himself to speak, but his brow was very black. He released her hands and rose to his feet.

'Do you know what it amounts to altogether—the whole of Julius's liabilities?' Then she nodded. 'Tell me the exact sum.'

'Oh, Alick, you are cruel, too! Why must I suffer in this way?'

'Because in the world the innocent must often suffer for the guilty,' he returned bitterly; 'because you and Julius are one even in this; because he will refuse to suffer alone.'

'My children and I are ruined,' she returned; and there was despair in her voice—the despair of a mother who sees her children threatened with some danger. 'He will not work himself, and he has taken the bread out of our mouths. Who will trust me with their children now?'

'Let me have it in black and white—from your own lips, Essie. If I seem cruel, it is for your good.'

But she did not seem to hear him. She was following out the same dreary train of thought. She had been made to come against her will, but now it was a relief to speak.

'When the furniture has gone, and the books, and piano, I shall have to close the school. I paid mademoiselle's salary yesterday. I owe nothing. The rent and servants' wages, they are all paid up. It was only yesterday that I told Julius so. I asked him if I were not a clever manager,' and she gave a ghastly smile. 'How was I to guess that all these years he had paid nothing?'

'Hester,' grasping her hands abruptly, and compelling her to look at him, 'you are wasting my time and your own. I want an answer to my question, and I am determined to have it, before I suffer you to leave that seat. How much does Julius owe?'

'His debts come to four hundred and eighty pounds. I made him tell me, but he has signed a bill besides. I could not understand what he told me, it was too confusing. I think he did it for a friend, but he is accountable for the whole sum; it is over three hundred pounds.'

'That makes a total of eight hundred pounds. You are right, Hester; it is absolute ruin.' Then a look of agony came into her eyes.

'I know it. But they do not send people to prison now; they will take our furniture and the pictures, and we shall be left with our bare walls and our disgrace. Do you think I could go out as daily governess? that anyone in Cromehurst would employ me? I must do something to feed the children. Harry and Phil are always so hungry.'

'Hush, you must not talk in that way,' he returned almost huskily, for it was gall and bitterness to him even to hear her. In his righteous indignation he longed to avenge her wrongs upon the man who had brought her to this. If Julius Vincent were standing before him at that moment, he felt as though he could have struck him to the ground.

'You coward—you contemptible, poor-spirited coward!' he would have said to him. 'You, to call yourself a man, and to bring the woman you swore to protect to this bitter disgrace! Every honest man will cry shame on you!'

Hester seemed to read these thoughts, and her mood suddenly changed. For the first time in her life her brave heart had given way, and in her just anger and utter despair she had given vent to reproachful words against her husband. For the moment the shock had been too great—the knowledge of his weakness and duplicity, his senseless extravagance and irresponsibility, had crushed her to the ground; but the angry light in Alick's eyes aroused her wifely instinct.

'Do not judge him too hardly,' she pleaded. 'He has been wrong, wicked; but he will have to suffer, too—we shall suffer together! When I first heard it all, I lost patience. God forgive me! I forgot he was my husband. I said cruel things to him; I had no pity. I made him afraid, for he shrank from me, and begged me to leave him alone.'

'I am glad for once in your life that you spoke the truth to him.'

'I was very cruel,' she repeated, lifting her white face to him. 'I was thinking of Ray and the boys; but I ought not to have spoken so to their father. When I married him, I knew he was not strong like other men. If he has sinned, I have sinned, too. We must bear the sin and the misery together.'

'And he sent you to me?'

'Yes, he said you might help us to think of something

He is very unreasonable; he wants me to have the children as usual to-morrow; he says we must keep the school going as long as possible; he is terribly frightened; he is almost prostrate with terror; he thinks Ray will suffer.'

Dr. Lyall was silent; he had no comfort to offer. Hester had made her bed, and must lie on it; and yet he loved her better than any other earthly creature after Gerda.

'If you could help me to think of something,' she went on, almost timidly. 'I am strong, I could work. There is nothing that I would not do, and he will work too.'

No answer.

'Alick,' very piteously, 'you are so wise; you can surely think of something?'

'You must give me time,' he returned coldly; but his face was almost as white as hers. He felt as though some fell grip, strong and remorseless as fate, was closing round his heart; but he would not stop to think what it meant. 'You must give me time.' That was all he could find to say, and Hester accepted this with her wonted patience.

'I must go home,' she observed, rising from her chair; but he noticed that she swayed as though with weakness.

'You cannot walk; you have no strength,' he said, in a milder voice. 'Sit down again, Essie; I will see if I can find something to strengthen you. I shall not be a moment;' and, without waiting for a reply, he left the room. 'I have done the best I can without disturbing the household,' he observed as he re-entered. 'It is only dry bread and Burgundy, but it will give you strength.' And, partly to please him, and partly because she could not contest his will, she drank a little of the wine, and crumpled the bread in her lap.

'I cannot swallow it,' she said, as he looked at her with grave rebuke. 'Let me go back to him, Alick.' And then he turned down the gas, and opened the door.

The cool spring air made Hester shiver again, but Alick drew a breath of relief, as though it revived him, and then he offered his arm to his sister.

'Do not walk fast, and do not try to talk,' he said. And she obeyed him, and in utter silence they arrived at Daintree House. A respectable-looking man admitted them.

'The lady is wanted in there,' he observed civilly. 'Mr

Vincent told me to send her to him at once;' and the backward motion of his head indicated the studio.

'Let me go to him first,' she whispered. 'I have left him too long, and suspense may have made him ill;' and he drew back to let her pass.

The man bolted the door, and went down to the kitchen. Dr. Lyall could hear his shuffling footsteps along the passage, as he turned in the direction of the drawing-room; but as he opened the door he heard a shrill, terrified cry:

'Alick, Alick! For God's sake come!' It was Hester's voice.

CHAPTER XXXVIII

JULIUS

'Forbear to judge, for we are sinners all.'—SHAKESPEARE.

THE next moment Dr. Lyall was in the studio; but even as he took that quick stride across the hall a suspicion of the truth flashed upon his mind, and, strange to say, he was fully prepared for the scene that met his eyes.

Julius was standing in the middle of the room, with Hester clinging to his arm. His shirt was unfastened at the neck, and an open razor was in his hand; and his face looked like the face of a dead man, it was so gray and ashy. Hester was hanging on his right arm with all her force. Dr. Lyall walked up to them, and struck open Julius's hand. The razor fell to the ground, and Dr. Lyall picked it up and put it in his pocket.

'You contemptible coward!' he said, looking full into Julius's eyes. 'Come away from him, Hester; you shall not touch him. You unmanly, pitiful hound, to terrify a woman in this mean way!'

Alick's eyes flashed fire at the miserable man, but Hester only flung her arms round her husband.

'He is mad, Alick—he is mad with shame and misery, and you shall not speak to him in this way! Julius, my darling, do not glare at us so. Alick will not hurt you. No one shall hurt you while I am by!' And the fond, faithful creature rocked him in her arms as though he were an infant.

Alick looked at them both with quiet disdain. Hester's pitiful tenderness seemed to fill him with impatience.

'Good heavens!' he observed; 'how can you be so credulous? Hester, he is not mad; he is only fooling you. Do you suppose'—with an irony that seemed almost cruel—'that the fellow would really have cut his throat? Keep off him, and let me give him the thrashing he deserves!'

Dr. Lyall hardly meant what he said; but he was in a towering rage, and Julius must be threatened and browbeaten. In spite of his anger, he would not have laid a finger on the abject creature before him; but Julius shrank back in affright.

'Do not let him touch me!' he implored. 'He is a stronger man than I am, and I never knew how to fence. Get him out of the room, Hester, and I will promise not to kill myself!'

Then Dr. Lyall broke into a disdainful laugh.

'Oh, you are quite safe, Hester; you will not be a widow yet. I would trust Julius with a roomful of razors; he is far too fond of his precious self to do himself damage. He never could bear pain or discomfort.'

'You are a brute, Alick!' returned Julius, stung to weak fury by this contempt. 'You think I got up the show to frighten Hester, because she was so hard to me; but you are wrong. I meant to do it; I was trying to do it when she came in and found me!'

'All the same, you would never have done it,' replied his brother-in-law. He did not disbelieve him in the least. 'You are far too great a coward for that sort of game, and I advise you not to try it on again. A second attempt might be equally successful, and land you in the county asylum. There! you may have your toy;' and he actually flung the closed razor at his feet.

Dr. Lyall knew the exact measure of the man on whom he was hurling these contemptuous epithets. His hard, pitiless sarcasms would sting Julius in his most vulnerable part. No man likes to be called a coward, or to be accused of playing the fool. Julius in his weak despair had tried for a tragical dénouement; he was in that state of mind when even death seemed preferable to reaping the effects of his own wrongdoing. He courted death, but a sudden horror of pain and blood-letting had made his hand tremble. The cold edge of the steel had hardly grazed his skin when Hester had seized his arm, with that cry for help.

Julius could bear it no longer. He wrenched himself free from Hester's clinging hands, and flung himself face downwards on Ray's couch. The child's pillow was still there, and a crumpled Robinson Crusoe handkerchief that Harry had given her. The coarse, flimsy rag was soon wetted with tears of weak rage. He was suffering terribly at that moment. He had brought ruin on his innocent wife and children. The very couch he lay on would be taken away, and his sick child would have nothing but the bare floor. If Alick would not help them, they must starve or go to the workhouse. His pictures would be seized—and he could not paint another in a hurry. He was not a fast worker, and at times his hand seemed to lose its cunning. How was Hester, with all her goodwill and courage, to support them? Here he groaned aloud.

Dr. Lyall paused as he heard that sound. 'Poor beggar!' he muttered between his teeth, as he walked up and down the room. The steady movement to and fro seemed to help him to think connectedly. Hester was kneeling at the head of the couch; she would not quit the spot where Julius was. Until that moment she never realized what despair meant. The husband of her choice was beside her, and she knew him now to be the poorest creature that a man could be, and yet she loved him—even when the brother who had been her comfort and support from early girlhood was overwhelming him with measureless contempt. If Alick failed her, all was lost indeed, and Hester Vincent was of all women most miserable.

Now and then Dr. Lyall's eyes rested for a moment on that rigid kneeling figure, but he spoke no word to her as he paced up and down the long studio. Different objects in the room arrested him, and he paused before each, as though appraising its value. Now it was an Indian cabinet, a Florentine lamp, or some piece of tapestry, with rich, subdued colouring and curious woven figures; a panelled screen that was the envy of connoisseurs, or a marble group of exquisite beauty. Presently he paused again, this time by the couch.

'Look here, Julius,' he said impatiently, in his ordinary tone, 'we have had enough of this foolery. Try to be a man for once in your life, and face the whole thing. It has to be faced,' he added slowly, 'and it will be better for you if you make a clean breast of it.'

Possibly Julius detected some relenting in Alick's voice, for after a moment he sat up and pushed his hair off his face. His lips were no longer ashy, but his whole aspect was quenched and dimmed; he looked like the ghost of the bright, handsome Julius Vincent. 'If thou faint in the day of adversity thy strength is small,' observed the wise king, and Julius's weak nature succumbed easily to the storm.

'I do not promise to help you,' he continued. 'I am not sure that help is possible; but, for the sake of Hester and the children, I will see what can be done. But you must be frank with me. Hester has told me a good deal, but she seemed confused between the various creditors.'

Thus admonished, Julius began a hurried, garbled statement, which was at once sternly checked.

'Let us have each point separately, please. I must understand everything as I go on. You owe Kipple and Kedge ninety pounds. Very well; now go on.'

After all, it was not easy to understand; it cost Alick much trouble and patience before he became master of the situation. Kipple and Kedge were the least important of the creditors. Julius owed a far larger sum for the furniture and costly toys he had so recklessly accumulated; but even this was less ruinous than the bill to which he had so thoughtlessly put his name.

Julius had gained absolutely nothing by the transaction. In a fit of weak good-nature he had consented to oblige a friend—a somewhat shady Bohemian, who lived by his wits, and called himself a literary man. O'Brien had warned Julius against him more than once.

'Jamieson is a pleasant-spoken sort of chap,' he observed; 'but he is without ballast. He is always borrowing fivers of his accommodating friends. He tried to borrow of me once, but I told him I was fairly cleaned out.'

Julius had only a vague notion how it had all happened. It was after a roistering supper, in the doubtful precincts known as Bohemia, amidst clouds of tobacco-smoke, and after hot whisky-toddy, that Jamieson had wheedled him into affixing his signature.

'He said I was quite safe,' continued Julius ruefully—'that he would take the thing up himself in three months.'

'Where is this precious friend of yours now?' was Dr.

Lyall's next question; and Julius was obliged to confess that no one knew his whereabouts. He had disappeared suddenly from his lodgings, leaving large arrears of rent, and it was supposed that he was in New York.

More than once during Julius's ignoble confessions his brother-in-law had looked at him sharply. The mixture of childish ignorance and obliquity perplexed and baffled him. Was there some deficiency in his moral nature? Was he wholly to blame for this terrible irresponsibility—for this deviation from rectitude—this utter want of principle?

'When I married him I knew he was not as strong as other men,' Hester had said only an hour before; and yet, if he had been absolutely demoralized and irreclaimable, would a woman like Hester have loved him?

It was incomprehensible; it was one of those startling paradoxes which meet every earnest student of human nature. Nero fiddling among the ruins of burning Rome was only a deeper, darker mystery than Julius reading Zola by his blazing pine-logs, with that load of debts in the background and the patient, toiling wife by her smoky fire. Alick felt vaguely that he was out of his depth. A man of Julius's calibre was a sealed book to him.

'There are no asylums for moral lunatics,' he thought, 'or Julius would be a first-class candidate. It would do him good to strip him of his creature comforts—to make him eat the bread of affliction and drink the water of affliction, until his gross selfishness were purged.' But he kept these thoughts to himself.

'There is no need for us to talk any more,' he said abruptly. 'I know all that is necessary for me to know. I must think over things a little.'

'You are not going to leave us, Alick?' and Julius looked as frightened as a child who knows he is to be left in the dark.

'Of course I must leave you;' and Alick's voice was hard and uncompromising. 'Have I not just said that I must think what is to be done? To think, I must be alone.'

'But you will come back soon, Alick? I know I have played the fool, but it is no use to say I am sorry—you would not believe me; but you shall see that I can work. I will dig, I will break stones upon the road, I will turn an organ—

anything rather than Beauty-bright should starve!' and Julius stretched out his white, beautifully-shaped hands with an eloquent gesture that brought a derisive curl to Alick's lips.

'Breaking stones is not very remunerative, I believe. I think you had better stick to your palette.'

Then Julius groaned.

'How am I to evolve ideas on a bare crust? A man must have food and warmth to create the beautiful.'

'Indeed! I thought Chatterton starved in a garret; and though I have not their names handy, I am sure I have read of a score of artists who painted their masterpieces amid sorry surroundings. Your excuse will not hold water, Julius.'

'I daresay you are right,' returned Julius sullenly; 'but I am certain of one thing, that privation would soon kill me. You are too robust, too bracing altogether, Alick, to understand how a man of my constitution feels.'

'Perhaps so; but I am not quite in the mood to argue the point. You had better go to bed, Julius.' Then he paused, as Hester looked at him wistfully. 'I shall be with you early in the morning. Try to sleep; you can do nothing more to-night. Julius, if you have any consideration, comfort your poor wife;' and then he went out of the room.

But this time Hester did not follow him. Her nerves were too much shaken, and, in spite of Alick's sneers, she could not trust Julius out of her sight.

'He is a good fellow,' murmured Julius, as the door closed; 'but he was terribly crushing. I have been a brute, Hester! It was a bad day for you when you married me.'

'It is too late to think of that now.'

'By Jove! I should think it was. You will have to put up with a bad bargain. After all, it is more your fault than mine. How is a man to help his nature? If you had not given in to me so much, I might have been different; but from the first you spoilt me.'

'Oh, Julius!' She was too faint and worn for any louder reproach. Would he argue with delicate sophistry until he had convinced her that their ruin was more her fault than his?

'The woman whom thou gavest to be with me, she gave me of the tree, and I did eat.' Had man's sophistry begun from that day when our first parent strove to shelter himself behind the woman's wrong-doing?

'Oh, Julius!' But the tears gathered to the weary eyes.

'He was right. I have been a brute, and I know it now,' continued Julius, walking up and down the room with agitated steps. 'Alick longed to kick me. I saw it in his eyes, and it would have served me right. You are too good for me, Hester! I have never deserved you;' and then, in his boyish, impulsive fashion, he fell on his knees before her. 'If I could only have finished that business, and left you a widow.'

Then Hester caught at his arm again with a cry.

'You shall kill me first, Julius!'

'Yes, and hang for it. Faugh! why do you put such horrible ideas into my head? Why are you looking at me like that, Hester? You foolish woman! don't you know what Alick said—that I had not the pluck to do it? And he was right. Like Mantalini, I object to be a damp, unpleasant body.'

'Julius! Julius! how dare you joke about such a thing to me—your wife?' And Hester's eyes began to flash dangerously.

'Upon my soul! I never felt less inclined to joke in my life,' returned Julius apologetically. 'I only wanted to make you comfortable. I shall never try it again, Hester. I funked the whole thing. It is only my way of saying that I am sorry.'

'I must believe you, for the sake of my own peace of mind,' she replied wearily. And then, as he still knelt before her, she put back his disordered hair and looked at him.

Julius was still pale, and there was a nervous twitching about his lips. His conscience and his nerves were suffering; but his face was still to her the perfect face of her young lover.

'Julius,' she said, with a dry, choking sob, 'say something kind to me to-night, for I feel as though my strength were gone and my heart were breaking;' and, as he looked vaguely alarmed at this, 'I have been a good wife to you,' she went on heavily.

'For heaven's sake don't talk to me like that!' he said, rising to his feet. 'You are tired out, and nervous. Alick said you were to try to sleep. Don't let us stop in this horrible room any longer. I have suffered tortures in it

already.' Then he kissed her cold lips, and tried to draw her from her place; but for the moment she resisted him.

'Let me say something first. I was not good to you to-night, Julius. I had no right to be so angry with my husband.'

'I forgive you, my dear child!' he returned magnanimously.

'Yes, but I am not sure I forgive myself. It is a wife's duty to bear everything. Julius, I want you to know that if the whole world turns against you I shall be faithful. If you sink any lower, you will take me with you. We shall sink together.' Then, for a moment, shame kept him silent. Fool, reprobate as he was, this woman's tenderness abashed him. He hung his head before her, like a child overwhelmed with penitence. 'You will remember that, whatever happens,' she continued in sweet, solemn tones, 'if you fall you will drag me with you. But'—with a sudden change of tone—'you will be good, you will be true! Julius, if love can save, my love will save you, for I will never let you go.'

'God bless you, Hester!' was all he could bring himself to say. But those few words became him better than any eloquence; it spoke well for him that he made no promise, strove for no defence, that he did not even venture to meet his wife's impassioned look.

'We will go now,' she said, touching his hand; and then they walked sadly and silently to their room.

'Is that dad?' asked Ray drowsily, as they passed her cot. Then Julius laid his head down on the pillow beside the child's. 'Dad's crying. Has mother been naughty to my own dad?' asked Ray anxiously. But Hester shook her head with a sorrowful smile.

'No one has been naughty to father, but he is unhappy, and his little girl must comfort him.'

'Dad is always good,' murmured Ray, as the small thin fingers played with Julius's hair. 'Don't cry any more, dad. Shall I tell you a nice story to send you to sleep? There was the little girl who went to be an angel, you know.'

'I would rather hear about Red Riding-Hood, Beauty-bright—Mr. Wolf is such fun!' and actually Julius listened patiently while Ray, in her shrill little voice, narrated the story. He even laughed at certain points in a praise-

worthy manner. 'Mr. Wolf is a terrible fellow!' he said once.

'Yes; but it is not true,' returned the child, with a satisfied smile. 'Mr. Wolf never frightens poor little girls now, you know. It is only make-believe; Harry says so.'

'Julius, the child must go to sleep now; she is only exciting herself.' But long after Julius had fallen into an uneasy sleep, Hester heard the little one talking to herself:

'Dad was crying—his eyes were quite wet. I don't like dad to cry. When I am an angel, I shall ask God to make dad an angel, too; he will be such a beautiful one, far beautifuller than mammie,' finished Ray sleepily; and Hester smiled drearily to herself in the darkness.

'Try to sleep,' Alick had said; but how could any woman sleep with that heavy leaden weight upon her heart? Hester lay there motionless, and aching from head to foot with dull physical pain. Her whole body seemed racked from the fierce tension of those last few hours, but nothing—nothing could still the agony of her thoughts. To-morrow Alick would come to them, and say there was nothing he could do. He would be kind and sympathizing; he would tell her that the boys' education would be assured. Perhaps Pamela would offer some trifling help—a few pounds for present needs. Alick would take a lodging for them—a mean, shabby set of rooms, in which Julius would chafe and fret from morning to night. And then he would try to find her employment. Perhaps some patient of his might consent to take her as a daily governess. She might give music-lessons, and Julius would teach drawing.

Hester strove to picture their future life. She thought of Julius trudging backwards and forwards in his shabby, threadbare coat, a discontented, embittered man; of herself, growing thin and gray with efforts to keep even that poor roof over their heads. Ray would dwindle and pine in the uncongenial atmosphere; she would miss her merry playfellow. The few luxuries that they were able to procure for her now would be missing then. Alick would do his best for them; but two growing lads to clothe and feed would cripple his resources. He would be married; perhaps he might have children of his own, and there would be little to spare for Harry and Phil. 'Oh, Heaven, have mercy on my unfortunate

husband and children!' prayed Hester, as the drops of anguish stood on her brow; for even at that moment, when her fainting heart could find no comfort, she forgot to pray for herself. Divine unselfishness of wifehood and motherhood! At that moment, in the eyes of watching angels, Hester was sublime.

CHAPTER XXXIX

KIPPLE AND KEDGE ARE SATISFIED

'Every man bears within him a Prometheus — creator, rebel, and martyr.'—*Thoughts of a Queen.*

'Weakness is the only fault that cannot be cured.'—LA ROCHEFOUCAULD.

As Dr. Lyall let himself into his house with his latch-key, a drowsy twitter or two from the eaves warned him that the day was breaking. Already there was a faint gray duskiness, which would soon broaden into light. How many hours had passed since he had heard that tap on the window! The gas was still burning dimly in his study. He turned it off, pulled up the blinds, and sat down in his easy-chair. He felt chilled and weary, and even the smouldering embers of the fire that he had lighted for Hester were grateful to him. He had told Julius that he must have time to think; but the problem he had set himself to solve was a terrible one. He knew, as he sat down beside those gray ashes, that it was one that involved his own peace of mind. How could Hester and her children be saved without a bitter surrender of his own happiness?

But he must first revolve the whole question. There must be no impulsive haste, no rash generosity; he must weigh rival claims, and judge dispassionately, as though he were an unprejudiced observer. 'I must not only think of Hester,' he said to himself; 'I must consider Gerda—my interests are hers now. How would Gerda have me act?' And then he set himself to argue the matter point by point. His little capital amounted to about nine hundred pounds, and Julius's

liabilities were over eight hundred. He might spare a hundred or so to satisfy Kipple and Kedge, but he knew that this would only bring down the other creditors—that all must be paid or none.

Even if he were to strip himself of half his little stock of money to pay Julius's debts, there would still be that bill. Julius had been a mere cat's-paw in the hands of a designing rascal; he had brought ruin—absolute ruin—on his own head.

'He is more fool than knave,' he thought bitterly; and then again he marvelled at the strange inconsistency of human nature. How could Hester, with her intense love of truth, her strong, honourable nature, love a man like Julius? 'It is the irony of fate,' he thought; 'it is the most inscrutable of all psychological questions, this strange affinity of souls that are at once so dissimilar and unequal.'

No, there could be no compromise, no nice adjustment of affairs, in Julius's case. The Philistines were upon him in grim earnest; he must satisfy the claims of his numerous creditors, or the furniture and all his personal effects would be seized.

Hester's sense of honour made the exposure and disgrace intolerable to her. All these years she had worked and toiled that she might keep a respectable home for her husband and children; the bread she had earned had been sweet to her, and when at night she laid her weary head upon the pillow, the thought that she owed no man anything had given her peace.

But now all Cromehurst would know of Julius Vincent's disgrace; she could no longer hold up her head as she walked along the streets. Daintree House would be closed, and her pupils scattered.

How little he would be able to do for her! The boys would still be his care; but it would be out of his power to support the whole family.

'When we are married, Gerda will be good to them,' he thought, and he repeated this half aloud—'when we are married!' How sweet the words sounded! He was growing weary of his solitude; Pamela was no companion to him. He wanted to see his wife's face when he came home of an evening; he needed her gentleness and affection. 'No man

ever needed a wife more,' he said to himself, as he rose from his seat, and began slowly pacing up and down.

It was growing lighter now, and he could discern the various objects in the room. There was the chair where Gerda had sat that last evening. He laid his hand upon it caressingly as he passed; but he was too restless to pause in that monotonous walk.

Some inexorable power—was it the voice of conscience?—seemed to compel him to picture the future. A dreary series of tableaux seemed to rise before his mental vision one by one, and stamp themselves indelibly upon his mind. The years were passing; he and Gerda were man and wife. The claims of his love had prevailed over a sister's suffering; she was the mother of his children, and dearer to him than ever.

They loved each other — they would always love each other; but was there no cloud upon their happiness? In his rounds he would sometimes see a threadbare, shabby figure slouching furtively through the back ways to the poor lodgings that represented home to him, and in this prematurely-aged man he would recognise the once brilliant, versatile Julius Vincent. Yes, the poor butterfly had been broken on the wheel; adversity had scorched the weak soul too severely, and deterioration and moral atrophy had been the result. Julius had collapsed into an utter wreck; his very gifts had rusted. No one would buy his pictures; his hand had indeed lost its cunning. His child's death had reduced him to feeble despair, and he no longer cared to keep body and soul together.

'He will die too, but not now—not until some weary years have been lived through,' whispered the voice. 'When Hester stands beside his grave and Ray's, she will thank God that the two she loved so dearly and mourned so truly are at rest.'

'Another tableau: he has entered that poor lodging. Can that be Hester—that gray-haired, gaunt woman who greets him in that subdued, hopeless voice?

She may well be hopeless, for day by day she must live with that poor wreck of manhood before her eyes. She must tend him faithfully, and shield that failing brain from the wondering attention of her boys. She has grown old with

work and sorrow. From early morn to late night she toils for the bare necessaries of life. Alick can do no more for her. He has children of his own; and of late years Harry and Phil have been burdens to him. Alick looks harassed, and more than once Gerda has sorrowfully confided to Hester her fears that he is working too hard.

'Have you come to see Julius? It is one of his bad days.'

Good heavens! is he mad or dreaming? The pictures are living realities; they are before him like the fiery writing on the wall. Even Hester's voice, so changed and plaintive, seems sounding loudly in his ears.

The twittering of waking birds grows louder; the grayness is shot with a faint streak of pink.

'It is not possible to stand by and see it!' he exclaims, as he flings himself again into his chair. 'I will go to Gerda; I will ask her what is to be done.'

But he groans as he says this. To tell Gerda is to seal his fate, and hers too. Well he knows what she will bid him do. But his resolve to tell her grows in force. As the sweet, still light steals over the ghostly shadows of his room, his will, always a strong one, is set to do this thing.

Alick Lyall knew himself better than other people knew him. Under his quiet reserve there beat a tender, unselfish heart. He loved his young betrothed with a passion that surprised himself; but such was the man's nature, that any personal happiness gained by the sacrifice of other lives was simply impossible to him.

'I will tell Gerda, and abide by her decision,' he thought, as he went up to his room for a brief rest before the labours of the day began.

Pamela thought her brother looked strangely ill at breakfast-time. He could eat little, but drank his coffee feverishly.

'Were you disturbed last night, Alick?' she asked, with some concern in her voice. 'I did not hear the night-bell.'

'I was out until nearly three,' was the brief answer. 'I believe I have only had an hour's sleep. Will you give me some more coffee? It seems to pick one up best.'

'I suppose it was an anxious case?' she remarked innocently as she passed him the cup.

'I have seldom had a more anxious one,' was his response; and then he rose from the table.

He had much to do, and little time to do it in. For once his patients must wait. Happily, he had no pressing cases; he could leave them safely for a few hours; and Hester's affairs were urgent.

They were still at breakfast at the Vicarage when he rang at the bell, but Gerda came to him at once, blushing like a wild rose with the unexpected pleasure of seeing him. But his paleness and unusual gravity soon damped her.

'Oh, Alick, is there anything the matter?' she asked, as he kissed her.

'Yes, dear; a great deal has happened since we parted last evening, and I have come to ask you a question.'

Then she sat down and pointed mutely to the chair beside her.

'You look worn-out, as though you have not slept all night,' she said anxiously, when he had taken the seat. 'Now, you shall tell me everything, and I will not interrupt you,' she went on softly. But her countenance changed, and her eyes were full of pity as he told her about Hester's visit and his interview with Julius. He only kept one thing from her—Julius's half-delirious attempt at self-destruction. He felt the story was not fit for her ears.

'Oh, Alick, how dreadful! And it is all his fault: that makes it all the harder for poor Hester. How sad to think that her own husband has brought this on her!'

'Yes, it is pretty bad. If she had only listened to me when I begged her not to marry him——'

But Gerda gently checked him.

'It is too late to think of that now; we must look at things as they are. If I understand you rightly, unless they have help at once they will be ruined?'

'Most certainly they will be ruined. Julius owes eight hundred pounds, and he has not a penny in the world.'

'Eight hundred?' and then she looked at him wistfully. 'What do you intend to do, Alick?'

Her question and the sweetness of her look moved him to sudden irritation.

'I intend to marry you,' he said, almost fiercely.

The answer seemed to take her by surprise.

'Do you mean,' she faltered—'I am very stupid, Alick, I do not seem to grasp things—do you mean by that, that if we are married you will not be able to help Hester?'

'I could help her, but I could not pay Julius's debts. Darling, you must try to understand—you must help me to decide. I have only a small sum of money laid aside for a rainy day—just nine hundred pounds. If we marry this year I may possibly have to use some of this money. I told your mother so; it was right that she should know. My income is small at present, and my professional expenses are heavy. Do you follow me, Gerda?'

'Yes, and I understand all you say. I see it now, Alick: if you pay Mr. Vincent's debts, we should have to wait a little.'

'A little? We must wait for years! Gerda'—seizing her hands and speaking with a strange intensity of tone—'do not speak yet: listen to me a moment. I am sorry for Hester—she is my own sister; but she is nothing to me compared to you. I have worked hard for many years—I have tried to help my family; but there are limits to self-sacrifice. Is it fair that the loss should be mine?'

Then she looked at him very earnestly.

'Will you not say "ours"?' she whispered reproachfully. 'Your loss is mine—you know it well, Alick.'

'My darling, forgive me if for once in my life I am selfish and unreasonable. I have come for your decision, and yet I dread to hear you speak. If I sacrifice myself, I shall sacrifice you!'

'Alick, let me ask you one question: should we be happy if we married and left Hester to her fate?' Then he was silent; it was the same question that he had put to himself. 'Would our home be blest and peaceful?' she went on, in the same quiet tone that even now soothed him. 'Should we feel no self-reproach when we saw Hester's misery? Alick, I know you far too well; there is no need to ask such a question. You could not do it; neither could I.'

'Do you mean that we must wait for years?'

'Will it be years?' and he could hear the regret in her voice. 'But they will pass, and we shall always be the same to each other. Nothing could make any difference.'

'Let it be so, then;' but for the moment he could say no

more. Gerda had spoken with a sort of tender exultation. Her lover's self-sacrifice seemed to ennoble him in her eyes; but Dr. Lyall only felt a dull, smothered pain. 'Let it be so!' —in those brief words the whole matter was settled. It had been a foregone conclusion from the first; he had practically decided it when he had made up his mind to speak to Gerda.

'You must not be too sorry about it,' she pleaded anxiously, as he continued silent. 'It is glorious to do as you are doing. If you only knew what I think of you!'

Then a faint smile came to his lips.

'Will it make you love me better?' he asked, a little incredulous.

'Need you ask such a question? My love would be worth nothing if it did not grow. Will it comfort you a little to know that?'

Then he pressed her hand with a look that was sufficiently eloquent. It was the first time since their engagement that she had spoken to him so plainly of her affection. Until this morning the demonstration had been on his side.

'Well, I must leave you,' he said, with a sigh; 'but there is much to be done.'

'But you will come this evening?' Then he hesitated. 'Just for five minutes. Alick, I could not sleep unless I knew how things were with you and Hester.'

'Then in that case I am bound to come.'

'Thank you. I knew you would be good to me;' and then she kissed him of her own accord, and watched him silently until he was out of sight.

No lady of olden times felt her heart swell more proudly, as she watched her knight ride forth to tilt or tourney with her colours floating from his lance, than Gerda felt as she stood there looking after Alick Lyall. Was ever knight more valiant? she thought. Had he not triumphed over the hydra-headed monster selfishness? Was he not going forth to ransom the weak and helpless? Would she not wait gladly, thankfully, for half a lifetime for one so leal and faithful?

When Dr. Lyall rang at the bell of Daintree House, he had made up his mind exactly how to act. Hester must be kept in ignorance of his intentions for her own good. He would take Julius only into his confidence. If Hester had

guessed his generous plans for her welfare, she would have opposed him with the whole strength of her will; she would have utterly refused to be benefited at his expense. Hester was as strong in her way as Alick was in his, and the generous contest would have been long and severe. She must be hoodwinked, kept in the dark. He must make her believe that some compromise would be possible. But even as these thoughts passed through his mind Hester admitted him.

Her face still looked wan and gray, but she was more composed. As Alick put his hand on the door of her little sitting-room she stopped him.

'Julius is in there with Ray.'

'Julius in your room!' he returned in surprise: for it was one of Julius's whims to complain that the hideous combination of colours in his wife's sitting-room made his head ache, and he never could be induced to enter it.

'Yes, he has taken a dislike to the studio; I cannot persuade him to cross the threshold. He looks ill—very ill—and Ray is not so well.' Hester spoke in the subdued voice of one who has nothing more to dread. That crushed, hopeless voice brought the moisture to Alick's eyes.

'The children are here as usual?' he began, as the sound of a piano attracted his ear. But before she could reply the schoolroom door opened, and a tall, slight girl, with sallow complexion and soft dark eyes, stepped into the passage.

'Oh, madame is engaged. Pardonne, it is the doctor, I see,' in a broken foreign accent.

'Mrs. Vincent shall come to you directly, mademoiselle,' observed Dr. Lyall. 'I will not detain her many minutes. Let us go into the studio for a moment, Hester; we shall be overheard here.' And she followed him at once. 'Leave things as much as possible to mademoiselle,' he said kindly. 'You are not fit for work to-day. Where is the man?'

Then Hester explained that he was in the kitchen. He was very civil, and gave them little trouble; but the cook had at once given warning.

'Never mind, let her go. Hester, I want to tell you one thing before I talk over matters with Julius. I am going to settle that bill of Kipple and Kedge's, and then we shall get rid of the man.' Then a deep flush came on Hester's cheek.

'Oh no, Alick! I could not hear of that for a moment, my dear brother; indeed, you must do no such thing. Julius owes them nearly a hundred pounds. Besides'—her voice sinking again—'it would only be useless kindness. Kipple and Kedge are the least important of his creditors.'

'I know that,' he returned hastily; 'but they have made all the mischief, and it will give us time. I have been thinking over things,' he continued, 'and I see no reason to be hopeless. We must have time and opportunity to effect a compromise, and to ensure this we must settle Kipple and Kedge.'

Then she caught his hand, and broke into a passionate fit of weeping. She had nerved herself for the worst; but this gleam of hope, the comfortable assurance in Alick's voice, were too much for her.

'He does not deserve it; we neither of us deserve such goodness,' she sobbed.

'Never mind all that, Essie; let me go and talk to Julius, and then we will get rid of the man.' But she had no voice to answer, and with a smile, and telling her to cheer up, and things would soon right themselves, he left the room.

Hester was right in saying her husband was ill. Julius's face was flushed, and his eyes had a strained brightness. He looked like a man on the brink of a nervous fever. He was walking up and down the room, with the child in his arms. Ray seemed fretful and feverish. She turned aside her face with a peevish frown as Dr. Lyall tried to look at her.

'Beauty-bright is keeping me company,' observed Julius, in his whimsical manner. 'We are both in a bad way. Let Uncle Alick see your face, my precious.' But Ray obstinately buried her head on her father's shoulder.

'Leave her alone,' returned his brother-in-law. 'The child is ill, and ought to be in bed. I will speak to Hester about her presently; I am afraid there is some mischief at work.'

Then Julius turned deadly pale.

'She is going to die. I am to be punished because I tried to take my life yesterday. Alick, for God's sake try and save her! I could not live—I positively could not live—without Beauty-bright.'

'Don't be such a fool, Julius!' returned Alick harshly; 'the child will hear you. I never said or thought that she was going to die. I expect there is another abscess forming in the hip. I will examine her presently.' Then Julius calmed down.

'My nerves are in a wretched state this morning,' he said energetically. 'I cannot eat or sleep. Alick, what is to become of us?'

'That is for you to decide. Look here, Julius, I have made up my mind to give you one more chance—but this is between you and me. Hester must know nothing.' And then in a few words he made Julius understand that his debts should be paid.

The relief was too sudden and instantaneous, and Julius cried like a child. Dr. Lyall had to take Ray out of the room. She was wailing miserably, and trembling like a leaf. He gave her to Hester, and told her that Julius was not in a fit state to be with the child. 'He is upset about Kipple and Kedge,' he said; 'but I shall soon talk him into reason.' But Julius was not so easily silenced. His weak, unbalanced nature was always in extremes. Alick could not restrain his outburst of gratitude.

'I am your slave from this day!' he said excitedly. 'Alick, your generosity is kingly; you have saved all our lives. I will do all you tell me. I will strip the studio; I will sell every article in it. I will paint from morning to night, with only four bare walls to look on. I will not be idle for a moment.'

'That is well said,' returned Alick; 'but you must not protest too much, Julius. Deeds, not words, will satisfy me. Now, if you are calmer, we will go to business; and remember that, until I give you leave, Hester is to know nothing.' But here he had no difficulty. Julius was too well acquainted with his wife's generous nature not to perceive the value of silence; and Alick knew that he could rely on him.

A couple of hours later Kipple and Kedge had signed a receipt, and before evening arrived Dr. Lyall had put himself into communication with the other creditors. The storm had blown over, and Daintree House was at peace; even the cook had pleaded guilty to over-hastiness, and had been forgiven at Julius's intercession.

Julius, in his boyish exuberance of joy, would have forgiven the whole world. He was radiant, overflowing with spirits. Hester rebuked him somewhat sadly at last.

'You talk as though our troubles were at an end,' she said, 'just because one of your debts is paid; but the evil is only deferred—we shall still lose our home.'

'Perhaps not. Alick will arrange some sort of compromise. He is a clever fellow! he is a glorious fellow! he is acting like a trump! Hester, I mean to turn over a new leaf—I have been a selfish brute all these years! I will clear the studio—I told Alick so. Maddox and Brown will take the things off my hands; they will fetch a lot of money. I will work—you and Alick shall see how I will work!'

Julius's eyes were clear and limpid as a child's as he uttered this protestation. Hester listened to it with a faint, incredulous smile. She would say nothing to damp his enthusiasm, but she had heard these promises before.

'Julius meant well,' she said to herself sorrowfully; but the power of belief in him had gone for ever. He was her husband, her sacred charge, her beloved—always her beloved; but not for one moment could she rely on him. And yet for once in his life Julius was in earnest.

'Is it all settled?' asked Gerda, when, late in the evening, the promised visit was paid.

'Yes, dear; we are arranging everything. Julius will go up to town with me to-morrow. If you have nothing else to do, you might sit with Hester. Ray is suffering very much, and I fear they will have trouble with her.' Then Gerda at once promised that she would do so: and after that he gave her full particulars of all that had passed.

'Oh, Alick, no wonder you look worn out!' she observed anxiously.

'It has been the hardest day's work I have done in my life,' was his answer; and then, after a few more words, he left her. Even Gerda could not guess how utterly spent and weary he felt. 'It takes it out of a man,' he thought, as he walked back slowly. 'Poor darling! she is so happy about it all; that is just her sweet unselfishness. But she little knows what I may have to ask her to do next;' and Dr. Lyall's face looked stern and sad as he let himself in at Roadside.

CHAPTER XL

BEAUTY-BRIGHT

'I saw the stars of the morning wait
On their lofty towers to watch the land,
As a little child stole up to the gate,
And knocked with a tiny trembling hand.'

B. M.

It was nearly a week before Hester became aware of the real state of things; Ray's suffering condition allowed her no leisure for thought. Mademoiselle was practically left in charge of the school, while Hester devoted herself to her sick child.

Cruel abscesses were sapping the little creature's strength, and the slow wasting that Dr. Lyall had long feared was now reducing the feeble frame; and although no word passed between him and Hester, she was fully alive to Ray's hopeless condition. If Alick could not save her child, no earthly power could save her; so Hester closed her lips and asked no questions, and summoned up all her strength to meet the impending sorrow. But as she sat beside the child's cot she marvelled sometimes at Julius's blindness. Strange to say, no suspicion of the truth seemed to enter his mind.

There was a fresh abscess, and the child could not be moved from her room—that was all he knew. He would rush up from his work every hour or two to kiss and pet her; but Ray received his attentions so languidly that he was easily persuaded to leave her to her mother's care.

'Beauty-bright does not love her dad as much as she used,' he said once, as Ray pushed him fretfully away.

The little creature heard him, and Hester saw her lip quiver.

'I do love dad, mammie,' she said, when he had left the room, 'but my leg does hurt so;' and hour after hour she would wail incessantly for Uncle Alick to take her pain away.

It was a cruel ordeal for any mother to bear; no wonder that Hester grew thin and pale as the weary watch went on. Once Julius summoned her to the studio; he said he had something that he must show her. Hester rose reluctantly, and followed him downstairs; but as she entered the room a little cry of dismay rose to her lips.

The room was perfectly bare—the carved cabinets, the Persian rugs, the tapestry, were all gone; the china, the articles of vertu that Julius had so dearly prized, had all disappeared. A single easy-chair and Ray's couch, a small table and an easel, were all that remained. Julius's face grew radiant as he saw his wife's surprise.

'Maddox and Brown have taken the things back,' he remarked. 'They have fetched a good price; Alick said they would. I am going in for sublime simplicity. The bare walls are a little trying, perhaps, but one gets used to everything. I should like to strew the floor with green rushes; but, as Alick remarks, they would be rather costly. Are you satisfied, my Hester? Is the atmosphere sufficiently bracing?'

'Oh, Julius, Julius, your beautiful room!'

But she could say no more. Julius patted her cheek kindly.

'Come, no fretting; it is a new experience. Look at my picture; it is to be the counterpart of "Cinderella." Alick approves of it; he says it will do me credit;' and Hester, with tearful eyes, admired and commended the artist to his heart's content.

'He is like a child with a new toy,' she thought, as she went back to Ray; the bareness is a novelty and amuses him.' And she was right. Julius exulted in his 'prodigal's husks,' as he called them. He still wore his magnificent velvet coat, for which Alick had paid; but there was no rare flower in his buttonhole. Julius effected small economies. He smoked briar wood pipes, and drank beer instead of claret. He

painted industriously, and Alick's judicious praises gave him just the impetus he needed. It was a small picture of Beauty and the Beast. Beauty was a chubby child, with dimples and roguish blue eyes, and the Beast a wise-looking, bandy-legged terrier, with a delicious shaggy coat. Gerda fell in love with it, as she had with Cinderella; but this time Julius did not talk contemptuously of 'pot-boilers.'

One evening, as Alick was paying his usual visit, he asked Hester to join him at the window for a moment. It was a lovely May evening, and the air was soft and refreshing. Hester felt her limbs tremble as she rose; she thought that he would tell her that Ray was worse.

Dr. Lyall felt decidedly nervous. He had made up his mind to tell her himself that Julius's debts were paid; but he knew her well enough to be sure that this would give her more pain than pleasure. And he was right. Hester listened to him in perfect silence, and her lips closed as though they would never open again.

He waited in vain for some answer or acknowledgment; then he touched her hand. It was cold as ice.

'Hester, what is the reason of this strange silence? Surely you are not angry with me?'

Then there was a sudden flash in the deep-set eyes.

'I am angry—I am bitterly hurt and angry!' And then she sat down on the window-seat, and he knew that it was because she trembled so that she could not stand.

'Essie,' he said gently, 'you must not take it so hardly. If you had been in my place, would you not have done the same?'

Then she burst out almost passionately:

'You are trying to smooth things; but I have a right to be angry. Julius knew. Oh, I see it clearly now! that is why he is so happy. He has consented to this monstrous self-sacrifice; he has allowed you to strip yourself of all your earnings! If I had known, I would have died rather than you had done this thing! Alick, I will not thank you! It was cruel, cruel to deceive me!'

'Hester, will you listen to reason? If for once in your life I deceived you, it was for your good.'

'My good?' she returned bitterly. 'Did I ever wish to be benefited at the expense of my brother's happiness? Oh,

you need not tell me; I know what this involves! How shall I ever look Gerda in the face again?'

'My dear child, Gerda fully approved of all I did. Her one thought was for you. Gerda and I have no separate interest; we think alike on most subjects.'

But Hester only turned a deaf ear to this. Her pride and her affection for her brother made his generous sacrifice intolerable to her. That she should be kept in ignorance for her own good, that Julius should have consented to accept all this at Alick's hands! No wonder that she smarted with a sense of injury, that her feelings of gratitude were too crushing for any sense of pleasure!

'I shall not talk to you any more until you are in a reasonable frame of mind,' observed her brother quietly. 'Good-night, Hester. When you have thought over things more calmly, you will be the first to own that I could not have done otherwise.'

But to this she made no answer; and yet, though they parted in this unsatisfactory way, the brother and sister never understood each other better.

'I should have felt the same in her place,' he said to himself. 'Gratitude is not always an easy burden.'

'You have allowed Alick to sacrifice himself for us,' was all she said that night to her husband; but Julius winced at the tone in which she spoke, though he only responded in his usual airy manner:

'My love, Alick is a magnificent fellow; he is the king of trumps! Upon my word, I have the deepest veneration for our dear Medicus. He has behaved to us in the handsomest manner. I am proud to do the bidding of such a man.'

'Julius, did you never think what my opinion might be on the subject? that I might object to owe everything to my brother?'

'My dear Hester, we all know your warmth and generosity of nature; but women are too much guided by their feelings. Alick and I understand each other perfectly. "Hester must know nothing of this"—those were his very words. Alick is always a trifle peremptory; you are both a little too bracing at times, my love.'

Then Hester sighed impatiently. Julius had no sympathy with her; he thought her scruples unnecessary and exag-

gerated. Why should she object to be grateful? Gratitude was a delicious attribute of human nature; it was at once elevating and soul-inspiring. 'Owe no man anything, but to love each other,' was an Apostolic injunction, but Julius would have added, 'If any man will pay my debts, I will be his slave for life.'

Gerda came the next day. Alick had sent her, but for the first time Hester received her almost coldly. Gerda took no notice. Ray was in her mother's lap, and she stood for a moment holding the little hot hand.

'She looks very small and weak,' she said at last. 'She has changed since I saw her last.'

'She will never be better,' returned Hester hopelessly; and Gerda did not venture to contradict her. Alick had told her the previous day that it was only a question of time.

'Does Mr. Vincent know?' she whispered.

Then Hester shook her head.

'He sees nothing; he thinks it is one of her ordinary attacks. If I hinted at the truth he would make himself miserable, and do nothing, and it is better for him to paint his pictures. If he reproaches me afterwards, I shall tell him that I only deceived him for his own good.' Then her mood changed, and she rocked the drowsy child tenderly, with the tears streaming from her eyes. 'Oh, my darling—my darling! What will my poor boy do without his Beauty-bright?'

'Dear Hester, you always think of him, and never of yourself.'

'I thought of myself yesterday. Gerda, did Alick tell you? I was angry with him; I let him go without a word of thanks; and yet all the time I longed to fall at his feet and worship him for his goodness.'

'You may be quite sure that he understood your feelings.'

'Did he? He only told me that I was unreasonable. He was wonderfully gentle with me, but, indeed, I was almost beside myself with shame. Julius and I have been burdens to him for years, and he has never complained; but now——' She stopped and looked at Gerda fixedly. 'Tell me the truth—I dare not ask Alick: will this prevent his marrying you in September?'

'We must wait, of course—we must wait a little. Hester

dear, there is no need to make yourself so miserable; it will not hurt us to wait for a year or two.'

But Hester refused to be comforted, and it cost Gerda much trouble and eloquence before she could persuade her to look at things from a brighter point of view.

She was still talking when Dr. Lyall entered the room. His quiet, comprehensive glance took in the position of affairs.

Gerda looked flushed and tired, and Hester's eyelids were swollen. She had been walking about the room with Ray, but stopped when she saw her brother.

'Well, Essie, am I not forgiven yet?' he said; and as she looked at him wearily, he stepped up to her with a smile, and put his arms round her and the child. 'Come, say "I am sorry, Alick," and then we shall be comfortable.'

Then Hester laid her head on his shoulder and sobbed.

'Oh, Alick, Alick, what am I to say to you?'

'Say as little as possible, my dear, and then I shall feel more easy. And now let me look at my patient;' and Ray opened her eyes with a faint smile.

'Ray wants to go down to dad,' she said plaintively.

'Dad must come to Ray, I am afraid,' returned Alick, looking pitifully at the child's wasted features. She would not suffer long, he thought; the feeble life was ebbing slowly but surely away. 'There is no need to say anything to Julius,' he said, as he took his leave; 'he will see it for himself presently.' And Hester acquiesced in this.

Gerda came every day after this. She relieved Hester when her presence was absolutely necessary in the schoolroom, and Pamela made herself useful, too, in another way. Harry and Phil spent all their evenings at Roadside, and Pamela superintended their lessons, and romped with them to their hearts' content; and she paid visits to Julius in his studio, and criticised his picture in her clear, sparkling way.

Pamela showed a great deal of feeling for her sister, but, as she told Gerda, sick-nursing was not her forte.

'I suppose I shall have to try my hand on Derrick some day,' she remarked; 'and it is to be hoped that he will appreciate me.' And then she paused and looked at Gerda with bright, half-veiled eyes. 'Derrick has another pupil,' she said abruptly.

'My dear Pamela, I am so glad!'

'Oh, I have better news than that!' with an important air. 'Derrick came down last night to tell me he has his first brief!'

'You don't say so!'

'Yes, I wanted to tell Hester, only she is too worried to care for outside interests. It is only a small one, but it will lead to other things. Derrick says he really feels as though he had his foot on the rung of the ladder at last. He did not talk much about it, but I could see how pleased he was.'

'After all, you will be married before Alick.'

Then Pamela jumped up and kissed her.

'You poor, dear things, how sorry I am for you! Alick has acted like a brick. Derrick said so at once. I never saw him so touched about anything. There were actually tears in his eyes. "He is a grand fellow, Pam! and you may tell him we all think so; and Miss Meredith may consider herself fortunate."'

'I like Mr. Vincent for saying that;' and, indeed, Gerda had always had a kindly feeling for Pamela's *fiancé*.

Gerda had her own anxious thoughts. Dr. Lyall had not seemed himself lately; he was grave and preoccupied. At times he had a worn, harassed look, for which she could not account. He was well—perfectly well—he told her, and then he abruptly changed the subject. He was unusually busy too. Dr. Brown had taken a severe chill one wet night, and a great deal of his work devolved on his partner. His evening visits at the Vicarage were hurried and unsatisfactory; sometimes he could only look in for half an hour.

Now and then, when they were alone, he would ask her if she had heard from Chesterton, and if Sir Godfrey showed any signs of relenting. But Gerda's answer was always the same. Her grandfather was still obdurate, and nothing that her mother or Gerard could say had any effect on him.

'Something must be done,' returned Dr. Lyall, with unusual impatience, one evening. 'The thing is becoming intolerable. If we could have been married in September Sir Godfrey's opposition would not matter so much; but under the present circumstances——' He stopped abruptly, then opened his lips, as though to say something; but Bessie entered the room that moment, and the opportunity was gone.

Gerda grew nervous at last; her quick intuition was seldom at fault, and she was convinced that Alick had something on his mind that he longed yet dreaded to share with her.

One evening she could bear it no longer, and she begged him to tell her what was amiss with him.

He was about to answer her evasively, when he met her eyes: their troubled expression touched him.

'Yes, I am worried. I will not deny it,' he returned frankly. 'Things seem to have gone wrong, somehow, and one hardly knows what to do for the best.' Then he looked at his watch, and rose hastily from his seat. 'It is late, and I must see Ray again, and Brown wants me to look in for a moment. I have no time to talk about worries now; never mind, they will keep.'

Gerda's eyes filled with tears; she was terribly disappointed.

'Please do not leave me like this,' she pleaded; 'it makes me feel out in the cold to know something is troubling you, and that I must not share it.'

'You shall know all about it presently,' he replied quickly; 'but you must be patient a little longer. My time is not my own.' And then she was obliged to let him go. He would tell her some day, and she must be content to wait for that.

It was long before the opportunity came. The shadows that hovered over Daintree House were closing in more darkly, but the King of Terrors wore on this occasion the garb of a merciful angel, waiting to carry home the worn-out child. There was no resistance to the inevitable. Hour by hour and day by day the weak hands relaxed willingly their grasp of life.

'Mammie says I shall be an angel soon,' Ray whispered once, when Gerda was sitting with her.

'Does that please you, my pet?' she asked, stroking the long fair locks, and Ray gave one of her quaint smiles.

'I have always wanted to be an angel—only dad cried so when I said it. It will be so nice to have wings and fly about. I always wanted to fly about in the moonlight, like the little white fluffy owl that Harry had once.'

As she got worse Ray ceased to ask for her father, but her eyes had a plaintive, seeking look. Hester, who seemed

to read the child's thoughts, would send a message to Julius that Ray wanted him.

'Does Beauty-bright want dad?' he would say cheerfully, as he came into the room; and the look of rapture in the languid eyes was sufficient answer.

'Dear Julius, sit where she can see you; it is all she wants,' Hester would say; and she was right. With that beloved face in view, Ray was completely satisfied.

After all, the end came suddenly. Alick, standing by the child's cot one evening, saw a change in the pinched features, and called Hester hastily to look.

'Where is Julius?' he asked.

'I will fetch him,' returned Hester breathlessly, and the next minute she was in the studio.

Julius was not at work; he was standing before his easel regarding his unfinished picture with proud satisfaction. He hardly looked round as his wife entered.

'Come, my darling, come!' she said, in a strange solemn voice that arrested him in a moment.

'Is not Beauty-bright asleep?' he asked in surprise.

But she put her hand on his shoulder.

'She will sleep soon, dearest; her heavenly Father is taking her to her rest. Alick has sent for you. Come!'

She had no need to quicken his footsteps; as the meaning of her words entered his brain, he dashed up the stairs. Ray heard the impetuous footsteps, and her eyelids quivered.

'Dad,' she murmured faintly, as he kissed her.

But as Hester, panting and agitated reached his side, the last feeble breath had been drawn: Julius's Beauty-bright was safe in the angel's arms.

'Julius, think of your wife; Ray is Hester's child, too.'

Alick's rebuke was a just one; Julius's self-abandonment of despair was terrible to witness. They could not induce him to leave the child's cot, and his passionate entreaties to Beauty-bright to give him one smile—one word—were utterly unnerving Hester.

'Look at that poor face, and spare her a little;' and at Alick's stern words, Julius lifted his head.

'Go to her,' he urged; 'she can bear no more. You must not leave her alone in her sorrow;' and then Julius's

mood changed. He staggered across the room, and threw himself at his wife's feet.

'Hester, I cannot bear it!' and he buried his face in her lap; and even then, though her heart was wrung with agony, she had strength to comfort him.

'Darling,' she whispered, 'it is better so; our child is safe. She will never suffer more. Dear Julius, the end has been so merciful, so unexpected! even Alick never thought it would be like this. It was a sudden failure of the heart, and it has spared her so much pain. Let us thank God for that.' And then she folded her arms round him and soothed him as though he were a little child.

CHAPTER XLI

'IT IS ALL OVER'

'Misfortune is like the hydra of Lerna; but nothing is gained by playing Hercules.'—CARMEN SYLVA.

'HE is better,' observed Dr. Lyall, as he entered the Vicarage drawing-room one evening. Gerda had looked up from her work rather anxiously.

It was a fortnight since Ray's death, and there had been fresh trouble at Daintree House. Julius had been ill; the sudden shock of his child's death had been too much for his weak, excitable nature. The night before the funeral he had been seized with a sort of nervous attack, and Hester had been unable to leave him the next day. He could not bear her out of his sight. The disorder was more mental than physical. Julius could not sleep, could not rest, or employ himself in any way; the sound of his boys' voices drove him frantic. Harry and Phil had to take up their abode for the present at Roadside. He roved from room to room in an aimless way; now and then some toy or trifle that had belonged to the child would be in his hand. Everything irritated him at times; Hester's pale, sorrow-stricken face would seem to reproach him, and he would start up from his couch and begin his wandering again.

Hester would sit listening to him for a few minutes, and then she would grow nervous and follow him. She would find him in a state of pitiable agitation.

'My sin has found me out,' he would say; 'but my

punishment is greater than I can bear!' And then he would entreat Hester to forgive him.

Hester's heart used to grow sick with pain as she heard him.

'I have forgiven you long ago, Julius,' she would say; 'will you not try to be brave and calm for my sake?'

But he only shook his head.

'I must sleep first. Hester, do you think that I am going mad? My thoughts are so strange and confused—I do not seem as though I understand what Alick says to me.' Then Hester would answer him cheerfully; but only Alick knew what those days and nights were to her.

Once the sight of her mourning seemed to excite him strangely.

'Why do you wear that horrible black gown?' he asked quite fiercely. 'It is desecrating the memory of our little lost angel. Beauty-bright loved everything that was gay—sunshine and flowers and beautiful colours. She was like her dad, and hated dark, dingy things.'

Hester grew a little hysterical as she repeated this to Alick.

'Must I humour him in this?' she asked bitterly. 'Will he forbid me to wear mourning for my child?' But Alick consoled her.

'He must be humoured, certainly; but not to that extent. Perhaps so much black depresses him. Could you not add a touch of whiteness? Ask Gerda; she will suggest something.' And Hester acted on this hint.

Gerda's ready taste was never at fault. When Hester put on her black gown next time, Julius made no remark. Perhaps the soft touches of white about the neck and wrists relieved the blackness. Later on, he told her quite gravely that black suited her perfectly.

'You look quite dignified and majestic,' he observed, looking at her critically—'the schoolmistress in her robes of office. But you are terribly thin, Hester.'

The first thing that really roused Julius was Pamela's suggestion that he should paint a portrait of Ray from memory. The idea seized his fancy, and with his usual impetuosity he stretched his canvas and began his work at once.

It was the best picture Julius ever painted, and if he could have brought himself to part with it, it would have fetched a good price. It was accepted and hung in the Royal Academy the following year. 'Beauty-bright,' it was called; but written on the margin of the frame were the words, 'A little pilgrim: only seven years old.' People crowded round the picture. Julius had given play to his fancy—the quaint pilgrim dress set off the child's innocent face. Nothing could have been truer to the life—the pinched, wan features of the little sufferer; the soft, pathetic eyes; the fair, uncurling hair; the thin hands, holding a tiny jagged cross. Hester burst into tears when she saw it, and a flush crossed Julius's face.

'Have I done it well, Hester? Is it our own Beauty-bright looking at us? Are not those her own sweet eyes?'

'It is Ray herself,' she whispered in an awe-struck voice. Julius, it is too beautiful!' Then she hesitated. 'You will not sell it?'

'Never!' he returned indignantly. 'It is my tribute, my monument. I will never part with it; it will be my companion, to cheer and inspire me in my work. For I will work, Hester; I promise you that.' And Julius kept his word. He became known as a painter of children. His charming sketches found a ready market. He was still fastidious and whimsical, and at times his subjects failed to please him. Then he would grow restless, and throw his palette aside, but not for long. His happiest hours were spent at his easel. When he looked up from his canvas, he would glance at the opposite wall. Sometimes it seemed to him as though Ray were smiling approval: the large soft eyes would grow suddenly radiant; the firelight seemed to surround the childish head with a nimbus.

'Beauty-bright has her wings now,' he would say to himself. 'Oh, my darling, do you still love your poor dad? Do you think of him among your angel companions?' and in the shadows of the gathering twilight it seemed to his fancy as though she moved closer to him, and that he could feel the pressure of her tiny hand. 'Beauty-bright and I have been together all day,' he would say; but Hester ceased to look anxious when she heard this. She knew that the little one was still comforting and blessing both their lives; that some

tender ministry—subtle and yet real—was changing Julius's weak nature, and leading it to better things; but she spoke to no one of this. Only she begged that the words engraved on the tiny marble cross that they put up to Ray's memory should be: 'And a little child shall lead them.'

When Dr. Lyall announced that June evening that Julius was better, Gerda gave a sigh of relief.

'I am so thankful, for Hester's sake!' she returned. 'Aunt Clare has just gone to see her.'

'Yes; I met her and Bessie,' he returned absently. 'She told me that she was going to sit with Hester for an hour. I was glad to hear it, for I wanted to speak to you particularly. It is not often that I find you alone.'

'Uncle Horace is out, too; he has taken Nora and Janie for a walk.'

'Bessie told me that also.'

Then he stood for a moment looking out on the garden.

The Vicarage drawing-room was a pleasant place on a summer's evening. Clare's clever fingers and womanly taste had long ago transformed the large barrack-like apartment into a homely, comfortable sitting-room. The glass doors opened on a wide gravel terrace, with three steps leading down to the lawn. Walter had hitherto kept this in good order, but the roses that were the pride of the family were Clare's especial care. On this evening the air seemed laden with their sweet perfume.

Dr. Lyall drew in a deep breath; then he looked at Gerda. Her work had fallen out of her hands, and she was watching him rather anxiously.

'You are going to tell me what has been troubling you for the last few weeks?' she said very quietly.

'You are right, dear. I want you to know that I have written to Sir Godfrey.'

'You have written to Grand?' Evidently she had not expected this.

'It was my duty to write to him. It is impossible that things can go on like this any longer.'

Then she put out her hand with an appealing gesture.

'You will show me that letter, Alick?'

'You shall see it presently, dear. I want to ask you something first. You told me one day that you trusted me

absolutely, that your faith in me was so great that no shadow could ever come between us. Do you remember those words?'

'I remember them well.'

'So do I. They were not words that a man would be likely to forget. But, Gerda'—taking her hands in his, and regarding her almost wistfully—'do you think you could still say the same, if I were to put your faith to a cruel proof?'

Then he could feel a slight trembling in the delicate palms, but her voice was quite steady.

'I should trust you always; nothing that you could do or say would shake my faith in you.'

'Even if you thought me wrong, dearest?'

'Yes, even then. Alick, why are you so solemn? Your manner pains me.'

Then he released her hands, and took the letter from his breast-pocket. It was directed and stamped, but the envelope was still open.

'I wrote it last night, but I waited for your permission to send it.'

Then he put it in her hands, and walked to the window. In spite of his calmness of manner, he was paler than usual, and his mouth twitched a little nervously under his moustache. Perhaps this was why he turned his back to her as she read the letter, or it might be that he wished her to feel free from his supervision.

It was some time before Gerda could understand the meaning of what she read, and yet no letter could have been plainer.

'My dear Sir Godfrey—You will be surprised to hear from me again. The nature of our correspondence has not been sufficiently satisfactory to allow of any farther appeal on my part; but the contents of my present letter will not displease you. On the contrary, I can promise you that it will give you unqualified content.

'Circumstances over which I have no control will prevent my marrying for some years. I need not trouble you with particulars, which are entirely connected with my own family; it is enough to tell you that the whole of my small capital, the result of many years' saving, is swallowed up, and I am

no longer in the same position that I was when I first asked for your permission to marry your grand-daughter. Under these circumstances, I consider that it will be only honourable on my part to release Gerda from her promise to me. I need not tell you that it has cost me much to arrive at this decision, but it seems to me the only right thing to do; and when you receive this letter, you may consider that our engagement is practically at an end.

'My only stipulation, and one that I have certainly a right to make, is that you will at once recall Gerda home. Under the present circumstances her continued stay at Cromehurst would only place us both in a painful position, and entail unnecessary suffering.— I remain, my dear sir, yours faithfully, ALEXANDER LYALL.'

'Please show this letter to Mrs. Meredith.'

The silence was becoming irksome at last; only a caught breath had reached his ear. He could bear it no longer; she must speak to him, if only to reproach him.

'Gerda!'

Then her eyelids lifted slowly, and he could see the dazed look of pain in her eyes.

'It is impossible!' speaking slowly, as though it were difficult to bring out the words. 'Alick, you cannot mean this!'

'My darling—my darling, I do mean it!'

Then a flush, as though of shame, crossed her sweet face. It was almost more than he could bear to see it.

'You said you could trust me,' he said, in a voice of strong emotion.

Then she covered her face with her hands, and as he bent over her he could hear her say that her faith was as strong as ever, but he must not try her too much. She could bear anything but to be sent away like this.

'Dear, will you listen to me? You must not misunderstand me for a moment. Yes, I am sending you away because I love you too dearly to have you near me, and for my own peace of mind. Gerda, it must be so; there is no other course open to us. I cannot marry you perhaps for years. If you do not give me up, the door of your home will be closed to you. How can I endure to know that?'

'My home is where you are, Alick. I am happier here.' Then for a moment he forgot the cruel part he had set himself to play. Gerda smiled at him almost happily. 'You could not do it, Alick.'

Then he shook his head very sorrowfully.

'There is no other way, dear. We must do the right thing, whatever it costs us, and it is your duty to go back to your mother.'

'She has Doris.'

'Yes, but Doris is not Gerda. Why should you deprive her of a child? Dearest, try to see this thing from my point of view. If I did not love you so utterly—if I did not know what we are to each other—I should have no strength to carry it out; but my love and your faith in me give me the power.'

'Oh, Alick, you are only thinking of me! You are doing it for my sake!'

'Yes, and for my own peace of mind. How is a man to see the girl he loves banished from her home? Mr. Glyn is not rich; he has his own children to maintain. You could not remain here, to be a burden to them.'

'I could work. I have thought of that before.'

Then he gave a strong dissenting gesture.

'Never with my permission, Gerda; that will be worse than all. I could bear my solitude better than I could bear that you should work,' looking at her delicate, refined face with fond pride.

'Your sister works.'

'Yes, but I am not Julius. Do you think I would ever drag down my wife as Julius has dragged down Hester? Have you any idea how sweet and bright she was before he married her?—and look at her now! Gerda, you are making me strong. When you speak of Hester, you only prove to me the wisdom of my decision.'

Then her lips closed. If he were resolved on this bitter sacrifice, she would no longer oppose him. He should break her heart—he should break both their hearts—but she would plead with him no more. He must know that this was worse than death to her—that they should no longer be anything to each other!

He read her thoughts, as he had often read them, and he took her hands and raised them to his lips.

'You will consent, Gerda?'

'Yes.'

'When Sir Godfrey recalls you, you will go home?'

'If you tell me to go I will go.'

'Thanks, darling, you are very good! Then I will send this letter;' and he closed it up, and replaced it in his pocket.

'Are you going?'

'I am going directly, but we must not part like this.' And she could see there were tears in his eyes. 'Gerda, say something to give me a little comfort. Tell me at least that you forgive me.'

'I have nothing to forgive.'

'Nothing!—when you are cold and pallid with misery, and it is all my doing.'

'You could not help yourself; you are suffering too. Do you think I can forget that?'

'No, dearest, and I do not wish you to forget it. All your life, I shall be as much yours as ever. Some day it will comfort you to know that.'

Then she looked at him, and her lip quivered.

'Shall I see you sometimes?'

'I do not know. Gerda, we must not talk of this now; let us wait until we are both calmer. This is trying us both too much. Will you let me go now? I will promise to see you again.'

'Then I will not ask you to stay. Alick, you shall have no trouble with me; your will shall be mine!' Then he took her in his arms, and kissed her passionately. 'My blessing, my best blessing!' he murmured. But he dare not trust himself for another word.

Gerda did not seek to detain him; she felt stunned, dizzy; everything seemed slipping from her. The sweet summer air seemed to stifle her. She was only conscious of one thought—that Alick was leaving her.

Suddenly she raised her head and listened, as though she were expectant of some sound. She remembered there was a pillar-box close to the Vicarage gate. He would drop the letter in as he passed. The next moment the faint click reached her ear, and she knew she was right. Her doom and his was sealed.

'It is all over,' she said to herself, as she went up to her room.

Half an hour later Clare found her standing by her window. Something in her attitude attracted her attention. Gerda did not seem to hear the opening door. Her hands were clasped loosely before her, and her eyes seemed fixed on vacancy.

'Is there anything the matter, Gerda? Oh, my poor child, what is it?' as she saw her face more distinctly.

'Alick has given me up. We are giving each other up.'

Gerda's voice was dry and strained, but she did not look at her aunt as she spoke.

'Impossible!' in a shocked voice. 'My dear, do you know what you are saying? Dr. Lyall is the last man to behave so badly.'

'You must not say that, Aunt Clare; you do not understand. No one must blame Alick; he is doing it because he thinks it is his duty, and because there is nothing else to be done. He says I must go home.' But she could not quite control her voice, and the sentence ended with a sob.

'Oh, my poor dear, how dreadful for you both! But he is wrong; there must be some other way. Let me talk to him, Gerda. I will bring him to reason.'

But Gerda shook her head.

'It will do no good,' she said wearily. 'You do not know Alick, if you think that anyone could make him change his mind. He is as miserable as possible; but he says it must be done—that I must go home to mother.'

'Yes, but you must not go like this. Gerda, let me talk to your uncle Horace; he will help us to think of something. Do you think that I can bear to see you suffer like this? He is making a mistake; but Horace will soon prove to him that there is no need for this exaggerated self-sacrifice.'

'Uncle Horace will not say so,' returned Gerda hopelessly. 'Aunt Clare, you do not understand. Alick is never wrong. If he says it must be done, it is because he can find no other way, and because Grand is so cruelly hard.' Then she sat down, as though her strength suddenly failed her.

'Am I troubling you, dearest? Would you rather be alone a little?' asked Clare tenderly.

'Yes, if you do not mind. Aunt Clare, you are very kind, but I cannot talk about it yet; it has been so sudden, and I do not understand it myself.' And then Clare did not utter another word; she only kissed the weary young face, and left the room. Too well she understood that craving for quiet and solitude. At such times silence is more precious than spoken sympathy. All Clare's impassioned partisanship, her tearful caresses, could do little for the girl. In this world each human being must dree his or her own weird.

CHAPTER XLII

A SILVER LINING

'My love knows no more of forgetfulness than children do of death.
—Lord Houghton.

The Vicar listened with a very grave face when Clare carried her story to him. 'Poor child!' was all he said when she had finished.

'Yes, indeed, you may well pity her. It would break your heart to see her; her voice is quite muffled, and she hardly seems to know what she is saying, and yet she does not shed a tear. Horace, you must help her.' But Mr. Glyn shook his head rather sadly.

'I fear there is nothing for me to do, my dear.'

'But surely you will remonstrate with Dr. Lyall. You are his Vicar, remember. You might tell him, at least, that there is no need for this Quixotic generosity.'

'Are you sure that he will agree with us? To tell you the truth, Clare, I hardly see how he is to do otherwise. If you wish to blame anyone, you must blame Sir Godfrey.'

'But my father would relent in time. I know he considers Dr. Lyall is too impatient.'

'On the contrary, he had shown a very tolerable amount of patience. My love, are you not arguing a little blindly? Do you think our own case gives Lyall much hope of Sir Godfrey's yielding? As far as we know, Gerda may be practically banished for years.' Then Clare was silent. She felt that her husband was not speaking without reason. 'Lyall is certainly cutting the Gordian knot with a venge-

ance,' continued the Vicar; 'but he was always a man of action. And then he has his sister's fate constantly before his eyes, so it is likely that he will err on the other side.'

'Then you do not blame him?'

'Most certainly I do not blame him. He is a brave man—he is the bravest man I know. I feel that my respect for him has decidedly increased since this afternoon.'

'Would you have done the same yourself, Horace?' she asked softly.

'Ah, you have me there, my dear. But at least I was not burdened with family cares as Lyall has been all his life. I was a poor man, but I had only myself to consider. And then I knew that I was the only man you would ever marry.'

'Perhaps Gerda knows the same. She and Dr. Lyall are certainly devoted to each other.'

'Then a few years' waiting will not hurt them. You look surprised, my dear, but I am a believer in the destiny of true love, and one of these days Gerda and Lyall will be happy.'

'If she could only hear you say that!'

'Perhaps I may tell her so myself, but, Clare, I think the less one says on this subject the better. Lyall must manage his own business. It will never do for us to interfere. In my opinion, he has done the right thing. He is acting in a straightforward, honourable manner, and, you see, Gerda perfectly understands him. Let her go home for a time, and see what comes of it.' And the Vicar spoke so decidedly that Clare found the ground cut from her feet. If Horace could see no way out of the trouble, it was no use for her to do anything.

Gerda would have agreed with her. Her simple 'credo,' her faith in Alick's right-mindedness and justice, was so great and so convincing that it sustained her even under this singular trial. But for a time she suffered severely, and more than once during that long night she told herself that her heart was broken. For the shock had been great, and for some hours she could only realise three things—that she was young, and life was long, and that she suffered. Many years afterwards someone told Gerda a sad story of a woman's life: her lover had been false to her on the eve

of their marriage, and had deserted her for another. Gerda had not said much, but as she listened her gray eyes filled with tears. 'I was unhappy, too,' she said to herself when she was left alone; 'but I think my unhappiness was almost joy compared to that poor creature's. Alick and I never lost faith in each other for a moment, but when one's love is betrayed and wasted—ah! no human power can soothe that agony.' And for many a night Gerda prayed for that unknown sister: 'That it may please Thee to defend and provide for the fatherless children and widows, and all that are desolate and oppressed.' For a long time there was a pencil-line drawn in Gerda's Prayer-book, and the word 'desolate' had a faint tracing under it, and she always repeated that prayer most fervently. 'At least I was never desolate, with all my trouble,' she avowed, and, indeed, there was no sense of desolation in Gerda's grief. Alick had decided on this thing, and it must be done; even if she did not agree with him, he must be obeyed. From the beginning of their intimacy his stronger nature had ruled and satisfied her, and from the first hour of their engagement his word had been law with her. Neither of them had owned this, but Gerda's deeper happiness lay in this secret and sweet allegiance of heart and mind.

So even in this bitter crisis there were no contest of wills, no reproachful thoughts in Gerda's mind; Alick saw her duty more clearly than she did. If she suffered, the suffering was his too, and they would bear it together. He might send her away from him, he might be stern with himself and her; but she must still be loyal to him in thought and word.

And even as she wept she was not without her comfort; Alick's words of tenderness still lingered in her ear.

'My blessing, my best blessing!' He had called her that, and he had assured her that his heart would always belong to her. 'I am sending you away because I love you too dearly to have you near me, and for my own peace of mind.' And again: 'All your life I shall be yours as much as ever.' In truth she had her consolations.

But when she came down to breakfast the next morning, Clare could have wept over her, and the Vicar's eyes were a little dim as he pressed her hand. All the soft radiant

brightness had died out of the girl's face, and the deep shading under her eyes gave them a pathetic expression; but she bore herself bravely. Clare kept her in sight as much as possible, and her tact and sympathy were peculiarly grateful to Gerda's worn spirits; but she did not try to make her talk.

'You will be glad to be quiet,' she said, as they went into the drawing-room; 'so I will just do my accounts as usual. If you want me I shall be at your service in a moment;' and Gerda thanked her as she sat down by the open window and unfolded her strip of embroidery.

But, after all, there were few stitches done. When Clare looked up from her column of figures, she always saw Gerda gazing out on the flower-beds, with eyes that certainly saw nothing; but any sound, even the opening or closing of a door, made her start and tremble all over.

'Surely she cannot be expecting him,' thought Clare, as she sighed and went back to her figures. But she would not put the question to her; she was almost relieved when later in the afternoon Gerda withdrew to her room under plea of a headache.

'I think I will lie down, Aunt Clare. Uncle Horace says there is thunder in the air, so perhaps that has something to do with it.' Gerda offered this excuse almost timidly; she thought she was behaving in a poor, spiritless fashion, and chided herself for her weakness. 'I wonder if Alick has a headache, too,' she thought, as Clare lowered the blind and smoothed her pillow.

'Bessie shall bring you up some tea presently, and that will do your head good,' observed Clare cheerfully, and again Gerda thanked her gratefully.

'It is kind of Aunt Clare to make no fuss over me,' she thought; and, after all, her headache was no pretence. The physical pain at last deadened all other feeling, and even the tea Bessie brought offered no immediate relief. She must just lie and bear it, and wonder if Alick were going his rounds and talking to his patients as usual. 'It seems like two lives—I suppose all doctors are like that,' she thought, somewhat vaguely, as she presently fell asleep. Gerda slept for some hours, and when she woke she was more like her old self. 'I am afraid Uncle Horace will

think me very weak for giving way like this,' she said, when Clare came to wish her good-night.

'On the contrary, he is most concerned about you; but he will have it that the thunder has something to do with your headache. It has been terribly stifling all day. I believe I have a headache myself, only I dare not tell Horace so.'

'Dear Aunt Clare, you have been troubling yourself about me.'

'Well, I cannot deny that fact; but no amount of headaches will do either of us any good, I fancy.'

Then Gerda gave a faint smile.

But the following afternoon, as they were sitting together, Mrs. Glyn heard a well-known knock at the door, and looked at her niece rather apprehensively. Gerda had heard it, too.

'There is Alick,' she said quietly; but she turned very pale as she spoke.

'Shall I leave you, Gerda?'

'Not now—not directly; he will tell you if he wishes you to go.'

Then Clare took up her work again. The position was somewhat strained to all of them, but Dr. Lyall soon settled things. He shook hands with them both, glancing hurriedly at Gerda as he did so; then he made a friendly inquiry after Mrs. Glyn's health.

'I do not regard you as my patient now,' he observed, in a matter-of-fact tone; 'but all the same, I think you have done me credit.'

'Yes, indeed. My husband says I am twice the woman I was; but he is still very strict with me. I never seem to have a will of my own now.'

'So much the better. He has found out that you are not to be trusted.' Then his manner changed, and he said rather gravely: 'I have come to talk to Gerda about one or two things. Will you allow me to take her into the garden for a few minutes?'

'Certainly not; there is no shade. You must not expose the poor child to that terrible glare; she was quite ill with headache yesterday. I am going into the study to write some letters, so no one will disturb you.'

'Thank you,' was all his answer. Then he waited until

Clare had gathered up her work; and when he had closed the door after her, he took the seat beside Gerda. She was still pretending to work, and she kept her eyes fixed on the pattern; but it is doubtful what sort of stitches were put in. After that day Gerda never touched it again. It was a cushion she had intended as a surprise for her mother. Doris found it in one of Gerda's drawers later on, with the silks sadly jumbled, and finished it of her own accord. 'It was such a lovely design, and it seemed such a pity not to use it,' she said very sensibly. But Gerda only shrugged her shoulders and turned away. Those orchids and lilies were odious to her; that little bent stalk in withered greens only reminded her of some of the saddest moments of her life.—'Is your head better now, Gerda?'

'Oh yes, it was only the thunder; at least, Uncle Horace said so,' she replied nervously.

'Yes, the thunder and other things. You are looking ill; but I ought not to be surprised at that.' He sighed heavily. Too well he recognised the change that had passed over the girl, even in those few hours. She was more sensitive than other girls—she could not take things easily. 'I have come to tell you that I have heard from Sir Godfrey.' Then Gerda put out her hand for the letter.

It was brief, but carefully worded. Sir Godfrey expressed himself as more than satisfied with Dr. Lyall's decision. He had behaved like a gentleman; he was extremely obliged to him for the concession; his granddaughter might return home at once; he had charged Mrs. Meredith to write to her; and he remained, with a flourish of compliments, his 'ever-obliged—Godfrey Hamlyn.'

Gerda gave back the letter without a word, but her hand was quietly detained. The touch of that cold, nervous little hand gave Dr. Lyall another pang.

'Have you heard from your mother, Gerda?'

'Yes, this morning; she has written very kindly.'

'You need not tell me that. I knew how sorry she would be for us.' And somehow Dr. Lyall's tone made Gerda feel more natural. Until now she had avoided looking at him, and the avoidance had given him pain; but now she raised her eyes to his face. He was looking at her very sadly. 'Which day do you go?'

'Not until Tuesday; Aunt Clare cannot be ready until then. You do not wish me to go before then?'

'I wish you!'—as though the question startled him. Then he checked himself. 'I am glad you will have Mrs. Glyn with you. Gerda, I want you to promise me one thing—that you will not let all this make you ill.'

'One cannot promise that sort of thing,' she returned evasively.

'I am not so sure of that. The will has a great deal to do in such cases. Gerda, for my sake, at least, promise that you will take care of yourself.' And the tenderness of his tone brought a rush of tears to Gerda's eyes.

'I will promise you that,' in a low voice.

'Thanks, dear. I knew you would not make it too hard for me; but there is something else you must promise, too—that if you are really ill, or if you are in any great difficulty or trouble, you will write and tell me so.'

'Do you think that will be right?' she asked dubiously. 'Alick, I thought we were to be nothing to each other.'

'Have you come to that already?' he asked reproachfully. 'Do you mean that I am not even a friend? Gerda, this is absurd! We must always be much to each other. Do you suppose separation or time will affect me?'

'No—oh no! I did not mean that.'

But his words were rapture to her. This was comfort indeed!

'Then you will write?'

'Certainly, if you wish it. But, Alick, there is one thing we have forgotten: I have no right to wear this;' and she drew off the ring, and held it out to him. It was a simple cluster of sapphires and diamonds, and it was her dearest and most treasured possession.

He flushed slightly.

'Is this necessary, Gerda?'

'I suppose it is. I think—I am sure you ought to take it back.'

'If you say so, I must do it. There! I will fasten it to my watch-chain. It will not show, and I shall have it safe. You will not mind my keeping it for a little?'

'For a little? What do you mean, Alick? I can never have it again.' Then he looked at her as though he doubted

whether he had heard her rightly. 'I do not understand, she faltered.

'I am sorry for that; I thought you knew me better Gerda, do you think that I shall ever rest, that I shall ever cease from striving, until this ring'—touching it—'is on your finger again?'

Then a deep blush crossed Gerda's face.

'I did not know that you hoped for that,' she whispered. But the flash of his eyes was sufficient answer.

'Then you know it now. Gerda, what must you have thought of me? How could you have imagined that I meant to lose you utterly? If I had feared that—— No, by heaven! as I am a sinful man, I could not have done it! It is bad enough as it is—to know that we must live apart for years, and not see each other; that I must know nothing of your life, or you of mine; that, to all intents and purposes, we must be strangers. But at least you may leave me this poor hope!'

'What hope, Alick?' very softly.

'The hope that in time I may still win you—the hope that one day my position may be so assured that I may dare to appeal again to Sir Godfrey. I shall have to begin all over again, darling, and I cannot promise either you or myself that it will not take years of work; but a man must live for something, and this shall be my ambition. Gerda, surely you did not mistake me? you must have understood this?'

'I did not know—I was not sure,' she stammered. 'Alick, you have made me so happy! I feel I can go home now.'

'Yes, and I can bear to let you go. But, darling, this is between ourselves. You may tell your mother, if you like; indeed, I think she has a right to know everything. Now you see why you are to take care of yourself, why I still claim the right of being your friend. Friends are for life.'

'If I had only understood this at first!'

But Gerda said no more. If she had known of this secret hope, her broken engagement and Alick's renunciation would not have cost her that secret humiliation and agony; and yet through it all she had trusted him. But he was not giving her up for ever.

'And you go on Tuesday?' he continued, after a brief silence, which was eloquent with meaning to both of them.

'Yes—in the afternoon. Alick, will you tell Pamela that I am so sorry not to bid her good-bye?'—for Pamela was paying a visit to some of Derrick's relations, and had left Cromehurst the previous afternoon.

'Oh, I forgot she will not be back until Tuesday. She was sorry to be obliged to go and leave Harry and Phil on my hands; but Derrick made such a point of it, and he so rarely takes a holiday, I told Pamela I could manage for three or four days.' And then he added thoughtfully: 'She is very much improved; that is your doing, Gerda.'

'I shall see Hester; I could not leave without bidding her good-bye.'

'No, dear; but it will be painful for both of you. Shall you go to-morrow?'

'To-morrow or Saturday; I hardly know which.'

'Let it be Saturday, then;' and she knew by his manner that he meant not to cross her path, and that he would give Daintree House a wide berth on that day. This would be their last interview; she would not see him again, perhaps, for years. As this thought passed through her mind, her delicate throat seemed to swell, and a choking sensation reduced her to silence.

Then he rose. There was nothing more that he need say, and he must spare himself and her as much as possible; but as for the last time he took her in his arms she clung to him almost convulsively for a moment.

'Take care of yourself, too, Alick. Do not work too hard.'

'Work will be my best friend, after you,' he said, trying to speak cheerfully; but it was a signal failure. Why should he disguise from himself or her that they were both suffering bitterly? 'Good-bye, my dearest—ever my dearest!' he whispered huskily; 'and God bless you!'

That was all he said. The next moment Gerda was alone.

CHAPTER XLIII

'IT IS NOT YOUR FAULT'

'God's stooping shows sufficient of His light
For us i' the dark to rise by, and I rise.'
ROBERT BROWNING.

DR. LYALL was right in his prediction that Gerda's visit to Daintree House would be somewhat trying. Hester had received the news of her brother's broken engagement with outward calmness. She dared not trust herself to say much to him, and he had purposely made his visit a brief one. But she had suffered keenly, and with an intensity that would have surprised even him. Hester's fervid and unselfish temperament predisposed her to this moral torture. But for the sake of Julius and her boys she would rather have begged her bread than have eaten it at the cost of her brother's happiness. It was bitterness to her that Julius did not share this feeling—that his denser nature failed utterly to comprehend it; and at this time she was experiencing the secret revolt and that divine discontent that a high-minded woman must always feel when the one dearest to her comes pitifully short of her standard.

Julius's willingness to be indebted to his brother-in-law gave Hester a severe shock; but she bore it as she bore all his defects, with a patience that only love could teach. The demands made by that imperfect and halting nature were always met loyally and faithfully; but Hester took no credit to herself for this. The charity that never faileth was the measure she used in her dealings with Julius. He

was her husband—in those brief words she summed up everything.

When Gerda called, she was shown into the dismantled studio, and after a few minutes Hester came to her.

'I hope you do not mind this room,' she said apologetically; 'but there was nowhere else to ask you. Julius is asleep on the couch in my sitting-room, and I could not disturb him.'

Then Gerda returned somewhat hastily that she had only a few minutes to stay.

'It is very cool and pleasant here,' she went on, trying to speak cheerfully, for Hester's solemnity of manner was almost tragic. 'I am so glad to hear that Mr. Vincent is really better, and that you feel less anxious about him.'

'He is certainly better. He had some hours' sleep last night, and to-day he is less restless, but I am still unable tc leave him; he cannot bear me out of his sight.' Then she stopped, and looked at Gerda in the penetrating way that was peculiar to her and Alick. 'Have you come to wish me good-bye?'

'Yes; I am going down to Chesterton on Tuesday, you know. Aunt Clare is to accompany me; she is to stay a month with us, and Uncle Horace will bring her back.'

'So I understood from Alick. He was here last night.'

Then, at the sound of that beloved name, Gerda's colour rose.

'I suppose he told you everything?' in a low voice.

'Yes, he told me everything. I do not remember that I said much in reply. There are some moments when it is not easy to find words. When Alick told me that you were coming here to-day, I begged that he would keep you away.'

'I am very glad that he did not give me that message; it was not a kind one.'

'I meant it to be kind. Why should you put yourself to needless pain? I am the worst enemy that you have in the world. I have come between you and Alick—but for me, you would both be happy.'

'Dear Hester, it is no fault of yours. I have told you this before.'

'No, it is Julius's fault. But then, a wife and husband

are one, so his fault is mine, too. Gerda, at least I can say that, if Alick and you are miserable, my misery is as great as yours;' and then suddenly she broke into passionate weeping. 'Oh, if I were only at rest beside my little child,' she sobbed; 'for this life is too dreadful!'

'My poor dear! I know how you have suffered.'

'Yes, I have suffered; but it seems to me, since Ray died, as though God's dealings are more merciful than man's. Was it not David who said, "Let us fall into the hand of the Lord, for His mercies are great; let me not fall into the hand of man." I was saying that over to myself yesterday when Alick was talking to me.'

'Dear Hester, you are surely not blaming him?'

'If I blame him, it is for your sake, and because one woman understands another. But I was not thinking just then of Alick—never mind what I meant—I am raging because of my own helplessness: there is so little that a woman can do.'

'There are few that have done as much as you, Hester.'

'That may be, and yet you see that I am utterly beaten. Circumstances have been too much for me. After all, Gerda, we must dree our own weird, even though the weird be a weary one.'

'But we must not lose hope,' returned Gerda softly. She was very pale, and as she spoke her eyes were full of tears, but she would not allow herself to give way. 'Hester, I cannot bear that you should grieve for us like this. If I could only comfort you a little!'

Then Hester shook her head.

'You must not try. There is no comfort possible for any of us.'

'Oh, Hester!' very reproachfully.

'Ah, I see what you mean. You will not speak his name to me, but, all the same, you think I am not without my consolation if I can see Alick every day. My poor child, do you not understand that that is the worst part of my punishment? If Alick would only refrain from coming, if he would cease from heaping these coals of fire that are so cruelly scorching, I could bear it better. But no, he will still be our good angel, and no want of gratitude on our part will prevent him from loading us with benefits.'

'I hope not. Hester, this is not right of you. I had no idea that you were so proud. You will tell me next that I am wrong to love you, but I think I love you all the better for what has happened.'

Then a strange softening passed over Hester's features. She could not hear such words unmoved.

'It is dear of you to say that.'

'But, all the same, it is true. Hester, we were to have been sisters. Do you think I can forget that? No one will ever take your place with me. If we never meet again, I shall love you as much as ever.'

Then she rose from her seat rather hurriedly, but Hester looked at her unflinchingly.

'Tell me one thing before you go, Gerda. Is there nothing I can do for you?'

'Nothing, only be good to him.' And then they kissed each other and parted.

Gerda broke down a little when she told Mrs. Glyn about her visit.

'I think it is harder for her than for us,' she said. 'She is very proud and sensitive, and the position is intolerable to her. If only she would not insist on blaming herself for her husband's faults!'

'She will always do so,' returned Clare gravely; 'it is a beautiful side of her character. Hester is not perfect, she is far too proud and hot-tempered; but she shows the nobility of her nature in this. She cannot go on her way rejoicing in her right-mindedness and moral rectitude, and leave that poor fellow to bear the responsibility of his own weakness. If she cannot raise him, she can at least suffer for him. Oh, Gerda, if one could only whitewash one's dearly beloved sometimes!' And Clare's tone made Gerda smile in spite of herself.

'I wonder how she would feel if she lost him?' she remarked presently.

'If Mr. Vincent were to die? Well, I think there would be few widows like Hester. She would mourn for him intensely. His faults would be forgotten, and he would be idealized in her memory. They are strange yoke-fellows, and in our eyes they are most unequal; but I am not exaggerating if I say that Hester would well-nigh die of grief

if she lost him. In one sense, her work in life would be over. You see, a marriage like Hester's entails such awful responsibilities that only a strong nature could support them. If they were suddenly removed, the vacuum would be immense. How is a woman like Hester to begin to live for herself?'

'But she has her boys.'

'Ah, to be sure! For the moment I had forgotten the little lads. She would always do her duty to them. Have you ever thought how largely the maternal element is mixed up with Hester's wifely love? She has the same sort of feeling for Mr. Vincent that I have for Walter. I do not know whether you understand me?'

'I suppose I do, in a way.'

'It is a feeling you would never have for Dr. Lyall, Gerda,' with a meaning glance; 'neither could I for Horace. They are both strong men. There, we will not talk any more, for you are looking very tired; but I am always eloquent about Hester—an intense nature interests me so much. I feel as a good officer feels when he first leads his men into battle: he has a sort of wholesome curiosity just to see how his men behave under fire. I always long to know how my pet heroine behaves. You are another of my heroines, Gerda.'

'I, Aunt Clare!'

'Yes, you are behaving beautifully. Even your uncle Horace says so, and he is a severe critic on all moral questions. You are giving us no trouble. Walter would say that you are exceedingly plucky, and I do love pluck.'

'You must not praise me,' returned Gerda, in a stifled voice; 'I am not really brave. If you knew how my heart sinks at the thought of Tuesday!'

'Of course it does, and I dare say many a soldier feels his heart sink when he meets his first charge; but if he obey orders, and remain in his place, he is a brave man. Duty is often done with much sinking of heart. I expect Dr. Lyall's heart has its own share of bitterness. There, I hear your uncle's voice; he is asking Bessie if she knows what has become of me. I will go to him, Gerda;' and Clare left the room.

'Am I really brave—or is it only that I do not realize

things?' thought Gerda, as she looked out on the sunset. 'Is it not rather that he is still so near me? At Chesterton it will not be so easy to be good;' and perhaps in a way Gerda was right.

The next day was Sunday, and as Gerda took her place in the Vicarage pew, she could not restrain a hope that Alick would be in his usual seat; but she was disappointed. Harry and Phil came alone. Poor Gerda was certainly not free from sinkings of heart then. Was he too busy to come, or had he stayed away on purpose to spare her feelings? And yet, if he had only known the comfort his presence would have given her, he would surely have come. Gerda felt a sudden sense of forlornness and separation as she glanced at that empty place. Harry had his uncle's Prayer-book, and was fingering the edges of the pages in careless schoolboy fashion. How Gerda longed to take it from him! Dr. Lyall was a man who was particular in this small thing—a dog-eared page was abhorrent to him.

In the evening she had grown listless with secret oppression, but when the Vicar rose to preach her attention was arrested. Could he have chosen that text for her? she wondered. 'Oh, tarry thou the Lord's leisure: be strong, and He shall comfort thy heart.' Oh, surely it must be for her! And as she listened the numb aching at her heart grew less. 'The Lord's leisure,' he was saying—'how few people are content to wait for that! "Give me the portion that falleth to me, now at once." Is not that our cry—the real inward cry of our hearts? Yes, we want our good things at once; but where is our faith and patience? And yet, maybe, our strength is to sit still. In the "Lord's leisure," in His own appointed good time, He shall comfort thy heart; only tarry thou for the blessing.'

'I have been faithless and weak,' thought Gerda, as she rose from her knees at the conclusion of the service, and followed Mrs. Glyn down the crowded aisle. 'If only he had heard that sermon too! and as this thought passed through her mind she raised her eyes, and saw Alick standing by a pillar. He was watching her—a half-smile passed over his face when he saw that he was recognised; but he made no attempt to leave his place and follow her. More than once

Gerda glanced behind her in the porch, but he was still standing by the pillar.

An hour later they were all sitting out in the Vicarage garden enjoying the moonlight. Bessie and the children had been singing some simple hymns; but the Vicar had suddenly announced that the dews were falling too heavily, and that they must sit no longer, and they had broken up into little groups, pacing up and down the garden paths. Clare and Janie went first, and Bessie and Nora followed them closely, and Gerda found herself alone with the Vicar. He was walking beside her with his hands behind him, and his eyes fixed thoughtfully on the soft white clouds that were veiling the moon.

'Uncle Horace,' she said, a little timidly, 'I want to thank you for that sermon.'

Then he started at the sound of her voice, and the great silver moon seemed to rush triumphantly from her brief obscurity.

'The clouds will not always hinder,' he said, half to himself; and then he stood still on the gravel path until Nora's laughing voice had become more distant. 'It was not an arrow drawn at a venture, then?'

'No; oh no! Were you thinking of me when you wrote that sermon?'

'That is more than I can tell you; but I think you have been heavily on my mind during the past week. My dear, I am glad you have given me this opportunity; there is something that I have much wished to say to you—that I honour you for your courage and unselfishness.'

'Uncle Horace!'

But she was too much surprised to say more. What had she done to deserve such praise from his lips?

'If you were my daughter, I should feel justly proud of you—you are behaving well under difficult circumstances. Gerda, it may seem cruel to say this now; but it is my belief that the time will come when you will thank God for this trial.'

'I cannot feel that now.'

'No, my child, no; you are under the cloud, and at such times the silver lining is not apparent. If you will take my advice, you will not deprive yourself of strength by looking too

anxiously to the future. The future—well, that is God's leisure; the present moment, the daily need, is all that concerns us.'

'But it is the present that is so hard.'

'Yes, child, and that is why you will need all your strength. We must prove our armour and test its usefulness before we go into the battle. Sometimes the light skirmish of daily life, its small, harassing demands and denials, are harder than the pitched battle. When the heart is as sore as yours must be, it is not always easy to forget one's self and think of others.'

'No, indeed.'

'But, all the same, that will be your hand-to-hand fight at Chesterton; but I shall not fear for you—you will not disappoint us. And there is one thing more I must say: I have to thank you for a great deal during your visit to us. We have had our trials, too, and I will not say that they have not been heavy; but they would have pressed upon us still more heavily but for your consideration and sympathy.'

'Uncle Horace, you must not say that.'

'Why should I not say it, if it be the truth? But I mean to be still in your debt. I am entrusting your aunt to your care. She is still far from strong, and the distance between us would make me anxious; but I know she will be safe with you and your mother.'

'We will take all possible care of her.'

'I am quite sure of that; so you have earned my gratitude beforehand. Now it is time for prayers, and we must go in.'

'You and Horace were having quite a long conversation in the garden,' observed Clare rather curiously, as they went upstairs.

But Gerda only smiled.

'He was far too good to me; I did not deserve it.'

'Ah, well, he is the best judge of that; but I shall always think he meant that sermon for you and Dr. Lyall, though I suppose he would not own it. You are the sick ones of his flock just now. By-the-bye, did you see Dr. Lyall, Gerda? He was in the Stanwix pew.'

'Yes, I saw him;' and then, as Clare noticed the expression on her niece's face, she changed the subject somewhat abruptly.

CHAPTER XLIV

MRS. MEREDITH POINTS A MORAL

'We do not choose our paths in life, and have nothing to do with those parts; our simple duty is confined to playing them well.'—EPICTETUS.

IT was late on a lovely June afternoon when the travellers reached Darley Station. It was some miles to Chesterton Hall from Darley, but the drive was a beautiful one, and Sir Godfrey's strong pair of thoroughbreds always did their work well.

'I suppose Gerard will meet us,' observed Mrs. Glyn, as Gerda began collecting the various magazines and papers which Mr. Glyn had provided for their journey.

'I suppose so, and very likely Doris will come too. Gerard is giving her driving lessons;' and then Gerda involuntarily sighed. No amount of effort on her part could make that journey less irksome to her, and her assumed cheerfulness did not deceive Clare's sharp eyes for a moment.

The smiling landscape, with its sweetly-scented hay-fields and picturesque groups of cattle, the gambolling lambs, the wild young foals, the small, trim villages, each with its gray church, were almost unheeded; as her eyes rested on the flying milestones, she only thought bitterly that each one marked the distance from him she loved.

After a little Clare ceased to talk to her, or to try and distract her thoughts by pointing out objects of interest. She would leave the girl to her sad musing. Silence is so often the truest form of sympathy. Gerda was experiencing that sudden failure of courage to which an impressionable nature is often liable. She was taking up her old life under

different circumstances, and her half-heartedness and dread of results seemed almost criminal in her own eyes.

'Do I love mother and Doris less because I am in trouble?' she thought. 'Why am I not more pleased at the idea of seeing them? and Gerard, too? Is he less my friend because I love Alick? Why do I feel as though I were a different person, and as though their interests were no longer mine? And yet Uncle Horace said that I behaved well.'

'Is that Doris—that pretty girl in blue, with all the dogs round her?' asked Clare suddenly, for Gerda had sunk into another reverie. 'Yes; she is nodding and smiling. She has seen you, Gerda.'

And Gerda roused herself in earnest.

Doris was running down the platform, with all the dogs wildly chasing each other round her; and as Gerda alighted, she came up, panting.

'Here you are, darling! Oh, how glad I am to see you again!' And Doris gave her an affectionate hug, much to the envy and admiration of a couple of young undergraduates who were just up for the long vacation. 'Where is Aunt Clare? Oh, there she is!' making another rush. 'Gerard is outside on the waggonette. He has sent Stephens to look after the luggage.—Are you very tired, Aunt Clare? Will you take my arm? Gerda is only calling to the dogs; she will soon follow us.'

Gerda did not find it easy to disengage herself from her canine friends; they were all clamouring for attention. Waif, her especial property, was jumping up with joyous barks and whines; while Zoë, her mother's pug, and Flip and Flop, the fox-terriers, were equally demonstrative and exigeant; and only Sultan stood by in grave, gentlemanly fashion, and wagged his tail affectionately.

'Down, Waif! down, good dogs all!' And then they formed themselves into a dutiful cavalcade.

Clare was already established in a corner of the waggonette, and was talking to Gerard. He raised his straw hat with a smile when he saw his cousin, and gathered up his reins a little nervously.

'Look sharp with that luggage!' he shouted. 'Wake up, some of you fellows!—Now then, Stephens, jump up. The horses are tired of standing.'

The young undergraduates were just climbing into a dog-cart. They looked curiously after the waggonette.

'Who is that handsome-looking fellow in the straw hat, Tyler?' asked one. 'Is he a neighbour of yours? I saw him nod to you just now.'

'Well, yes; but we don't see much of him. The Hamlyns are a cut above us.' And George Tyler spoke with a slight sneer. 'My people do not get on with the Hall people. He is Sir Godfrey's nephew, and his heir, and they do say that he and his cousin will make a match of it. Not the round-faced one in the blue gown—the fair-haired one in gray.'

'Well, he is in for a good thing, any way. I should not mind driving those browns. Touch up the mare a bit, Tyler, or she will never take that hill. If I were Hamlyn, I would sooner take up with the other one; she is uncommonly nice-looking,' which shows that Doris, who regarded herself as no beauty, was not without her admirers.

'I drove all the way here,' observed Doris, with praiseworthy attempts to amuse Gerda. 'We put Stephens inside, and Gerard gave me a lesson. He says that I have improved, and can take my corners quite nicely. The horses were such dears! only Juliet will shy at Farmer Blasson's white gate.'

Doris was talking fast out of pure nervousness. Gerard had carefully primed her for the occasion. He had noticed that her hand was a little shaky, and that the corners of her mouth had taken a certain droop, which boded tears.

'Look here, Doey,' he said rather severely, 'I hope you do not intend to meet Gerda with that sort of hearse-and-plumes expression. That will never do, don't you know. Pull yourself together, and say something cheerful. It will make things ever so much easier for her.'

And as Gerard was infallible, Doris strove with all her small powers to fulfil his behest.

'She has a sweet little face,' thought Clare. The two girls were opposite to her. Doris had just furnished some further particulars about Juliet's misdemeanours, and then somewhat furtively she slipped a small gloved hand into her sister's. 'I am so dreadfully sorry for you, but I must not say so,' the squeeze seemed to say; and Gerda smiled faintly as she felt the pressure.

Clare leant back in her corner with a sense of luxurious satisfaction. She knew every turn of the road. How often had she and the elder Gerard ridden down those long wooded lanes! She remembered vividly the bitterness of her parting with her mare Lady-Bird, and the tears she had shed upon her glossy neck. Horace had never realized how much she had given up for his sake; and yet she had never repented it. Ah, there was the village and the white gates of Braeside; and there was Mrs. Hake, in her broad-brimmed hat and gardening gloves, coming out of old Giles's cottage. It was as pretty as ever, Clare thought—the gray cottages, smothered with roses and clematis; the little plots of garden ground, full of nasturtiums and London pride and small yellow pansies. There was the ancient elm-tree, with its circular seat, where the old men smoked their pipes and had their rustic palaver of an evening, while the women gossiped to each other across the flowery fences, and the children played and raced each other with shrill, exultant cries. That simple Arcadian picture—how often it had risen before Clare's eyes, as she had walked through the noisy, crowded streets!

There was the turning that led to the church and Rectory; and now they were driving down the 'Terrace' as it was called—a broad piece of road, with a row of elm-trees and a fine open view of green pasture-lands lying below them, and which Clare in her girlhood used to term 'the land of Beulah.'

On the other side of the road were the Hall cottages, where certain aged pensioners of Sir Godfrey's bounty lived; and beyond were the park-gates, and the wide carriage-sweep that led to the Hall.

Gerard brought them up in grand style; and as the horses' hoofs rang on the gravel-sweep, Sir Godfrey came out in the porch to welcome his daughter. Mrs. Meredith and Rogers were behind him.

Clare turned a little pale when she saw her father, and Sir Godfrey's fine old features twitched slightly with nervousness. Through life the strong wills had clashed, but the old man had been vanquished. There are some natures who never really pardon a defeat, and Sir Godfrey's was one of these. From the day Clare had left him for Horace

Glyn, she had become less to him; but Clare had never ceased to yearn for her father's old tenderness.

But, after all, Sir Godfrey was not without his feelings, and when he noticed the delicacy of Clare's aspect, and the languor of movement that had replaced the old briskness and activity, the stiffness of his manner sensibly relaxed.

'I am glad to see you, my dear,' he said, kissing her with some solemnity.—'Honoria, your sister is tired—she is extremely tired. Perhaps she would like to go to her room at once. I am not at all satisfied with her looks. I hope your maid has everything comfortable for her. She would like to have her tea upstairs. No; well, then, we will go into the house.—My dear, can I offer you my arm? You are terribly fatigued—excessively fatigued.'

'Grand, are you not going to speak to me?' observed Gerda gently. 'I hope you are going to tell me that you are glad to see me, too.' Gerda's tone had a certain meaning in it, and Clare recognised her own spirit as she heard the girl's voice. Sir Godfrey became fussy and nervous in a moment. Clare had for the moment engrossed him, but this meeting with his grand-daughter was decidedly awkward. She had been contumacious, too, and had justly deserved his displeasure. But the prodigal had returned, though not of her own will, and it was only seemly that the sceptre of forgiveness should be extended to her.

'My pleasure at seeing you must depend on your conduct, Gerda,' he said with frigid dignity. 'It is your own fault that you did not come home three months ago; but there'—magnanimously—'let bygones be bygones.' And he imprinted a frosty kiss on her forehead. 'I can at least assure you that your mother and Doris will be glad to get you back.'

Gerda's lip curled with secret amusement—the touch of those cold withered lips on her forehead was somewhat chilling, but she understood her grandfather thoroughly. His forgiveness was conditional; it would depend upon her future conduct. In his heart he exulted that she had been compelled to return; he had missed her sorely, but it was part of his discipline with his grand-daughters that they must not be allowed to know the extent of his affection for them. If Gerda would only behave herself properly and

forget that tiresome doctor, he would condone her past in gratitude; and though he was not without his secret hopes, Gerard should never be mentioned to her again. 'I shall have it out with him some day,' she thought as she followed them into the hall. 'I cannot live under his roof and not tell him the truth;' and then she looked round for Gerard, but he was whistling to the dogs and did not seem to notice her.

Gerda found it impossible to get a word with her mother and Doris—they were far too busy carrying out Sir Godfrey's fussy orders. He had suddenly woke to the conviction that his daughter had been worse than he had imagined; the change in her shocked him—she had actually gray hairs, and her manner had lost much of its charming sprightliness; she was looking old, and her dress was remarkably unbecoming. Honoria looked quite young and handsome beside her. He was shocked, he was excessively shocked, and so on.

'Clare has been very ill—I told you so, father,' observed Mrs. Meredith in a soothing voice; 'but she looks a great deal better.'

But Sir Godfrey was not to be hoodwinked in this fashion. His eyes were open now with a vengeance. If Horace Glyn could not look after his wife better than that, it was a grievous pity that he ever married her.

'I tell you what, Honoria,' he burst out presently, when they hoped that a lull had set in — Rogers had been summoned, and orders had been given to him that a new-laid egg, lightly boiled, should be sent up at once, notwithstanding Clare's laughing assurance that she could eat nothing; for the sake of peace the egg had to be swallowed —'I tell you what you shall do, Honoria. You shall write a note to Dr. Reynolds, and ask him, with my compliments —with my compliments to step up to-morrow morning. I should like him to prescribe for your sister; I have the greatest faith in Reynolds—he checked that last attack of gout very cleverly.'

'My dear father,' remonstrated Clare, 'there is not the least necessity to send for Dr. Reynolds. Dr. Lyall has given me full instructions how to treat myself. He——' And then Clare stopped and blushed with annoyance. In

an unguarded moment she had mentioned Dr. Lyall's name, and Sir Godfrey had immediately become very rigid. He had lifted his hand in his favourite fashion to give greater emphasis to his words, and it still remained stiffly outstretched, but Gerda rose at once to the occasion.

'Mother, I am sure Aunt Clare ought not to talk any more. Do please take her to her room and make her lie down. And, Doris, I think I had better go too, and get rid of this dust.'

Then the three ladies rose at once.

'You managed that very cleverly, Gerda,' whispered Clare remorsefully as they went slowly up the low, broad stairs. 'I could have bitten my tongue with vexation when I made that mistake, but father was so ridiculous about Dr. Reynolds.'

'I am glad you mentioned him,' returned Gerda quietly, but her voice was not so clear as usual. How tired she was!—dog-tired, as Gerard would have said. If she could only get rid of them all—but no! Doris was following her with affectionate offers of help, and she could not shut her out.

'Oh, you poor, dear darling!' exclaimed Doris, when the sisters were alone. 'How dreadful it must be for you! I cannot help crying when I think about it;' and Doris's blue eyes were very misty as she spoke. 'It is so selfish of me to be so glad to see you—when you are coming back like this; but Gerard says I must not worry you with too much sympathy.'

'Did Gerard say that?'

'Yes, he was lecturing me all the way to Darley—he knows what a goose I am. He is so awfully sorry for you, but he thinks it better not to tell you so. He says nothing will do you any good. I am afraid he speaks from experience;' and Doris shook her curly head very solemnly. With two blighted beings on her hands, Doris's work would be cut out for her. If love is supposed to be the business of women's lives—and a miserable business, too—some people must take upon themselves the office of consoler.

Gerda had gone through a great deal the last week; in her quiet, gentle way she had suffered martyrdom. At the present moment her worn spirits craved quiet and rest

Through her favourite window she could see the gleam of water through the trees; there was the spot where he had saved her life. If she could only sit down by that window and think about him a little! but Doris's arms were softly imprisoning her, and her round, babyish face was puckered up with feeling.

'But I have wanted you so badly,' she finished.

'Yes, dear, I know; and you have been very good and patient.'

'Oh, but Gerard helped me; and after all, I have had nothing to try me, except, at least'—as the memory of Lewis Everdean crossed her mind—'but that was only tiresome, and made me angry. But you have suffered so much, darling.'

'We will not talk of that, Doris. There are some things that will not bear speaking about.'

Then Doris looked almost frightened.

'Must I not talk to you about Dr. Lyall?'

'Not in that way; but there is no reason why you should not mention him. Doris, I want you and mother to understand once for all that nothing is different with me. We have given each other up because he said there was nothing else that we can do, but in heart and soul I shall always be his;' and then she rose and asked Doris if she had seen the key of her trunk.

When Doris left her, Mrs. Meredith took her place. She looked hot and tired.

'I have not been able to speak a word to you,' she said plaintively; 'but your aunt Clare is asleep now. Has Doris been helping you? You look worn out, Gerda; but, of course, I must not wonder at that;' and she kissed her affectionately.

'Have you wanted me too, mother?' asked Gerda wearily.

Her mother's touch and caress soothed her more than Doris's eager sympathy; with all her want of tact, Honoria's widowed heart could feel for her child.

'So you have lost him,' she said tenderly, in her soft, cooing voice; 'but we must try to make it up to you.'

'No, mother, I have not lost him;' and Gerda's fair head was erect now.

'Not lost him, darling?'

'Certainly not. You speak as though we had ceased to love each other. That would be loss indeed—it would be more terrible than death itself.'

'Oh, I did not mean that, Gerda! Of course you have not ceased to care for each other. It is sad enough to know that you cannot marry him.'

'I cannot marry him yet—perhaps we shall neither of us be young when that time comes; but all the same we shall be faithful to each other. Mother, you know him now, and you will understand what I mean. Alick will never change!'

'Do you mean that he has still hope, Gerda? I am almost sorry to know this. It would be wiser to give him up utterly and at once; suspense and uncertainty will only wear you out before your time.'

But Gerda shook her head.

'No, mother, you are wrong; I shall not be so weak.'

'It is no question of weakness,' returned Mrs. Meredith, with a sigh. Her heart was aching for her child's sorrow, but all the same Dr. Lyall's doggedness of purpose troubled her. 'Gerda, do you remember my cousin by marriage, Sybil Meredith?' Then Gerda shivered slightly; she knew that story well. 'She and Captain Middleton were devoted to each other; but her father would not hear of her marrying him. His regiment was ordered to India; he was only a subaltern then, and old Mr. Meredith insisted that they should give each other up.'

'Yes, I remember; you told me about it once.'

But Mrs. Meredith refused to take this hint; the story had a moral, and Gerda would do well to lay it to heart.

'They were simply infatuated with each other. Sybil was lovely—you have seen her portrait; and Edgar was one of the handsomest men I knew. When the parting interview took place, they made a mutual vow never to give each other up.'

'Do you blame them, mother? I think they were right—perfectly right.'

'But all the same her life was not a happy one. She kept her word, and waited for him. She refused several eligible offers of marriage. When he came for her, her beauty was gone, and her youth too. She was only seven-and-thirty, but she looked far older than that.'

'You speak as though beauty were everything,' returned Gerda impatiently. Why had her mother dragged up this old story?

'No, but all the same he was disappointed in her; but he was a true, gallant gentleman, and he married her, though he had ceased to love her. What could he do, when she had been faithful to him for sixteen years? But it was not a happy marriage. They had grown apart, and not all his efforts could prevent her from finding out that his heart was no longer hers.'

'It is a sad story,' returned Gerda thoughtfully. 'Mother, I know why you have reminded me of it. You think I shall grow old and faded and sour waiting for Alick; but you will see you are wrong. Most likely Sybil doubted Captain Middleton; she may have been made unhappy about him; but, all the same, he was good to marry her. But you need not fear; after a time I shall not be unhappy.'

'If I could only be sure of that, my darling!'

'Then if you will be patient with me for a little, I think I will promise you that. Mother, since you have been talking, I have been looking at that bit of the lake shining through the trees. Do you remember that winter afternoon when Alick pulled me out of the water? Do you think that the life he saved ought to be an embittered, useless life? Do you think it was given me back for that? No, mother dear—a thousand times no! While Alick lives and works for me, I can never be miserable; and if I want him too much and get impatient, I will just look at that gleam of water, and feel ashamed of myself. Now you must dress, or I shall get into disgrace with Roberts.'

And then she kissed her, and Mrs. Meredith felt herself gently dismissed.

CHAPTER XLV

SIR GODFREY OPENS THE POST-BAG

'Whatever new discoveries have been made in the region of self-love, there remain many unexplored territories there.'

'Few know how to be old.'—La Rochefoucauld.

Dinner had been postponed for another hour, to suit the convenience of the travellers. It was a sacrifice reluctantly conceded to the shrine of paternal duty; and when Sir Godfrey took his place at the table, he looked round at his children with a benignance that was significant and reassuring. It proclaimed a peaceful amnesty, with a comfortable ignoring of all vexed subjects.

Gerda and Gerard, who were both conscious of secret embarrassment, and who as yet had found little to say to each other, were soon put at their ease by Sir Godfrey's garrulity. It was Clare who had to bear the brunt of his questioning; who was advised and admonished with every course; who was pitied, encouraged, and delicately reproved; and who was made to feel almost oppressively the magnificence of Sir Godfrey's reception.

'Rogers, will you give Mrs. Glyn another glass of champagne?—My dear'—with authoritative tenderness—'Rogers has his orders: I cannot allow you to dispute them. If you will take my advice'—with a slight stress on the last words—'you will empty that glass at once. Champagne is a valuable medicine; it gives a fillip to the whole system. I dare say'—dropping his voice—'that you have not been in the habit of taking it. I believe'—somewhat stiffly—

'that your husband is a total abstainer. It is one of the fads of the present age. But I put it to you'—looking round the table with severe impartiality—'if it were wrong to drink wine, why are we told in the Bible that "it maketh glad the heart of man"? Yes, Honoria, those are the very words, I believe—"maketh glad the heart of man."'

'I am sure I do not know, father,' returned Honoria helplessly, feeling that she was addressed; but Clare took up the cudgels valiantly.

'Horace is a total abstainer on principle. He sees so much misery in his parish from over-indulgence in strong liquors, that he finds it necessary to set an example to his people; but he is not bigoted. He has never obliged me to conform to his rule, though the children have always worn the blue ribbon.'

'It is a great mistake,' returned Sir Godfrey emphatically. He never lost an opportunity of having a fling at his absent son-in-law. 'Mr. Glyn makes a great mistake. I believe St. Paul is considered an authority.' But here Gerard made a diversion, and prevented a lengthy and heated monologue on the temperance question *versus* total abstinence.

Gerard became talkative all at once. Clare was looking fagged and weary in her efforts to keep up an intelligent interest in Sir Godfrey's various topics of conversation. She had answered his questions about Walter; she had enlightened him on the ages of Nora and Janie, and had listened dutifully and with an inward pang to his ironical observations on Willie's education. And she had also endeavoured somewhat fruitlessly to partake of the different courses, but it was a relief when Gerard interposed.

'I heard a piece of news at the Rectory this morning,' he observed. 'Allingham has got a living, and he and Miss Hilton are to be married in October. Miss Hilton told me so herself.'

'I am very glad to hear that,' returned Mrs. Meredith, who, woman-like, was at once interested. 'Gerda, my dear, we must go and congratulate Frances. She told me only the other day that she could see no chance of their marrying for years, "unless the bishop gives Bertie a living," she said to me.'

'Let me go with you, mammie,' returned Doris hastily. 'I am so fond of Frances.'

'We can both go. I am very fond of Frances, too,' replied Gerda, who was quite aware why Doris was so eager to go to the Rectory. Foolish child! did she think that she grudged Frances her happiness? 'I hear Robina Stewart is engaged too, and to a German officer; but Robina was always cosmopolitan in her tastes. I wonder how Mrs. Stewart will like her to live at Frankfort?'

'He is a very nice fellow, and Robina is as happy as possible.'

'It seems to me that everybody is thinking of getting married,' observed Sir Godfrey jocularly. 'You must look out, Doris, or you will be an old maid. By-the-bye,' changing the subject with elaborate care, 'has anyone heard anything of the Everdeans lately? I understand Lady Brooklyn and her husband are to spend a night or two at Braeside on their return from Paris;' for Constantia was now the mistress at Brooklyn Park. 'You have not made Captain Everdean's acquaintance yet, Gerda?' addressing her for the first time.

'No, Grand;' but she carefully avoided looking at Doris, whose face and neck were in a glow, and who was diligently plaiting her table-napkin into folds, to Gerard's secret amusement.

'Humph! Well, he was a pleasant, gentlemanly young fellow, and we saw a good deal of him when the Everdeans were at Braeside. We must ask Lord and Lady Brooklyn to dinner when they are here, Honoria, and we must get the Pagets to meet them—at least, if you think Morgan can be trusted to serve up a dinner;' which, as they had just finished an excellent repast, was ungenerous on Sir Godfrey's part. But there had been a trifle too much mace in the white soup, which had not escaped his attention.

'Aunt Clare, you must go to bed immediately, or Dr. Reynolds will certainly make his appearance to-morrow,' observed Gerda, when they left the dining-room. 'Grand has tired you dreadfully; but, then, he is a little excited to-night. He does not always talk as much as that.'

'He looks very much older,' returned Clare a little sadly. 'What a fine old face it is, Gerda! He was always my beau-

ideal of an old English gentleman; Pamela used to say the same. He has such grand manners—they almost overwhelm one at times. He is killing the fatted calf for both of us; but no one ever did it in such splendid style. I am afraid we both found it a little depressing. Oh dear! no wonder Horace finds my father rather difficult.'

'Uncle Horace and he are such different men.'

'Yes; they are as far apart as the poles. Horace would vote all that talk humbug—he does so hate society talk. He is very fond of that saying of Thoreau—do you know it, Gerda? "Beware of all enterprises that require new clothes, and not rather a new wearer of clothes." My father wants Honoria to make a grand dinner for the Brooklyns; that is just because they are aristocrats.'

'Grand is an aristocrat, too!'

'Yes, indeed, bless his old heart! But he is angry with Horace because he is not aristocratic also. Gerda, is it not strange? When I saw my father and heard all his talk, my pride at being a Hamlyn seemed to die a natural death. I felt, as I listened, that my husband was a far nobler man. And yet'—her colour rising a little—'he belonged to the people!'

'How do you mean, Aunt Clare?'

'His parents were quite humble folk. Horace told me so when we were engaged; but they were both dead, so I never saw them. My father found it out after we were married, and it made him furious; but I think since Walter has gone that I have grown more humble. If my Horace were a king, I could not reverence him more!'

'I am quite sure of that,' replied Gerda. 'Now, if there is nothing else I can do, I must leave you and go downstairs.'

On her way through the hall she came upon Gerard. He was smoking his cigarette at the open door; but, for a wonder, Doris was not with him—her mother had just called her away. After a moment's hesitation, she joined him.

'Is Doris in the drawing-room, Gerard?'

'I believe so—Aunt Honoria called her just now; but she is sure to be back directly. We generally take the dogs for a run in the park these fine evenings. Shall you be afraid to come with us, or are you tired from your journey?' But Gerda denied that she was tired. 'All right, then, we will walk up and down until Doris joins us. If you mind

my cigarette, I will throw it away.' Then Gerda, with a little reproach in her voice, asked him why he was so ceremonious with her.

'I have never minded your cigarettes, have I, Gerard?' Then Gerard laughed a little nervously.

'Of course not; what a duffer I am! All right, then, I will go on smoking. What a jolly evening it is! the moon will be out presently. You were always fond of moonlight and that sort of thing!'

'Yes,' she returned absently, and her manner changed. 'Gerard, I do wish you would be like your old self. You need not be afraid of speaking to me!'

Then he pitched his cigarette into the bushes, and turned to her in his old brotherly way.

'I have been funking it rather, don't you know. Look here, Gerda, now you have given me the opportunity, I shall be glad to say a word. I am sorry—upon my word and honour, I am as sorry for you as possible.'

'Dear Gerard, I quite believe you.'

'When Uncle Godfrey called me into the study and gave me that letter to read, I said it was hard lines for you both. I think Lyall has done the right thing; but all the same, it is an awful shame!'

'How do you mean, Gerard? Surely you are not blaming Alick?'

'Alick! Is that his name? No, of course not. Haven't I said he has done the right thing? But all the same, it is a mean thing for Uncle Godfrey to take him at his word. I wish I knew the rights of it all. Has he not money, Gerda?'

Then Gerda, in a few quiet words, put Gerard in possession of the facts.

'So you see,' she finished, 'that he has sacrificed himself for his sister.'

'Yes, I see. I am glad you have told me this; I shall like Lyall all the better for it. Look here, shall I have it out with Uncle Godfrey? I don't mind a bit of a row now and then.' But Gerda would not hear of this.

'You are very good, Gerard; but it would be no use. It would only make us all uncomfortable, and it would not help us in the least. Alick has done his duty, and I must

do mine — if I have to wait half a lifetime. He is worth it.'

'Oh, you mean to wait for something to turn up. I told Doris that I knew you would. Upon my word, I think you are right. If a fellow is worth anything, a girl ought to stick to him—that is my opinion.'

'Yes; and it is my opinion, too.'

'I wish I could do something to push matters; but I am afraid I should only make things worse. Uncle Godfrey is getting old, and it is not easy to influence him; but all the same, you must not lose heart: it is a long lane that has no turning.'

'Are you two talking secrets?' asked Doris, with a pout. 'I have been following you ever so long, and you did not hear me, though Sultan came to me at once. If I am not wanted, I will go back to the house.' And Doris's voice was a little tremulous. Those evening walks with Gerard had been so delicious; but now Gerda had come back, and he had forgotten her.

Gerard changed countenance in the darkness, as he heard that little catch in Doris's breath.

'We always want you, Doey,' he said rather gravely, as he made room for her. 'Gerda and I were talking a little seriously, but we have finished now. I wanted to help her, but it seems as though there is nothing that I can do.'

Then, at his kind tones, Doris felt ashamed of her brief jealousy; but she had had him all to herself for so long, and what—what if the two blighted ones were to console each other? The poor little girl felt another painful prick as this thought occurred to her.

'I am very selfish and wicked,' she thought, as they all three walked on together. Flip and Flop were tumbling over each other in the dewy grass; Waif was scratching lustily at a big hole in the hedge in the belief that he had discovered a rabbit warren, while Zoë sat and barked at him; Sultan was scouring the park, with the majestic sweep of a retriever in good training; he was chasing some night bird, under the mistaken notion that it was some rare game. It was a good time for men and dogs, they thought. Doris added another petition to her prayers that night—for the grace of unselfishness. The poor child

accused herself bitterly, never dreaming, in her innocence, that her heart was no longer in her own keeping.

Gerda sat long by her window that night. She felt disheartened and dismayed. If these few hours had seemed so endless, how could she live through the months and years that lay before her? Would she wake each morning with that dull weight on her heart? And then she recalled her Uncle Horace's words: 'If you will take my advice, you will not deprive yourself of strength by looking too anxiously to the future. The future—that is God's leisure; the present moment, the daily need, is all that concerns us.' 'God's leisure,' she whispered. 'I must not forget that.'

Gerard was keeping his vigil, too, as he smoked endless cigarettes on the terrace. It was one of those fragrant summer nights when it seemed a sin to go indoors and miss all the sweetness. Somehow, he felt too hot and restless to sleep. Was he glad or sorry to know that his cousin was under the same roof with him again? He had dreaded this evening, yet now it had passed he was conscious of some subtle change in his feelings. He loved her, but some transmutation, some metamorphosis, had taken place; something had been eliminated from his love. Was it because he realized more than ever that she belonged utterly and irrevocably to another man, and that all hope had died a natural death? Gerard was no sophist; the occult reasonings, the vexed problems, and never-ending psychological questions that harassed many brains, never troubled his wholesome nature. Gerda was as dear to him as ever, but she had become less to him; her companionship was no longer a necessity, she had separated herself too completely from him; but none the less did he long to serve her to the full extent of his powers. Her very sorrow made her sacred in his eyes.

'If I could only think of something to bring them together!' he thought. But no plan occurred to him, and the problem was still unsolved when he went up to his room. Strange to say, his last waking thought was about Doris. He seemed to hear the break in her voice as she petulantly asked if they wanted her. 'Doey is different, too,' he said to himself as he turned upon his pillow.

Gerda soon had an opportunity of speaking to her grandfather. The very next morning a slight mistake on Sir Godfrey's part gave her the desired opening.

The post-bag was always laid on the library table, and it was Sir Godfrey's habit to sort out the letters for the household; it was one of the small daily duties in which he delighted. When he sounded his little silver gong, Rogers, or one of the other servants, would carry the letters into the breakfast-room. Sir Godfrey would generally peruse his by his library fire, or on summer mornings while he paced up and down the terrace; but occasionally he would carry them in unopened, and read them at the breakfast-table; and he had done so on that morning when Dr. Lyall's letter had acted like a bomb on the Hamlyn household.

Now, it must be owned that Sir Godfrey was somewhat of a gossip, and nothing pleased him better than to hear any modicum of news. It gave a pleasant flavour of interest to a somewhat monotonous existence, and he would discourse with an old man's garrulity on any subject, however trifling, that was brought under his notice. Honoria and her girls knew this, and were quite willing to indulge him in this harmless fashion, though it cannot be denied that Gerda and Doris had few correspondents. The girls had never been to a boarding-school, and they had contracted none of those strong friendships so common to school-girls. Their friends were all in the neighbourhood, and the only form of correspondence in which they indulged were notes of invitation to tennis-parties and archery meetings, or an entreaty to learn some new stitch, or to borrow the last copy of the *Queen*. But now and then there would be a letter from Bessie or Aunt Clare. Frances Hilton, the Rector's eldest daughter, was Gerda's favourite companion at Chesterton, and Robina Stewart and Doris had during the last few months taken a strong fancy for each other's company; but the intimacy in both cases had been a mild one, and although Gerda had been five months at Cromehurst, only one or two letters had passed between her and Frances.

Now, it so happened that, as Sir Godfrey was sorting the letters in his fussy way, he noticed accidentally the Cromehurst postmark, and he at once concluded that the letter

was from Bessie, though, as Bessie had never written to her grandfather, he was certainly not acquainted with her style of caligraphy.

'I really must take the opportunity of remonstrating with Clare about the girl's handwriting,' he muttered; for Sir Godfrey had the old-fashioned idea that a fine, pointed handwriting was the correct thing for young ladies. 'No well-bred young gentlewoman'—Sir Godfrey's favourite phrase—'would indulge in those sprawling, unsightly characters. It is a vile innovation of modern days, and is as pert as the young ladies themselves.'

Unfortunately for Sir Godfrey's intention, Clare was not at the breakfast-table. Honoria explained that her sister was too much exhausted by her journey to rise at her usual time, and Roberts had taken her her breakfast.

'Certainly, my dear, she is quite right. Clare must be treated like an invalid; she is deplorably out of health—deplorably out of health.—I trust you are refreshed and rested, Gerda,' looking at his grand-daughter graciously. Gerda was looking a little pale and disturbed—she had changed colour at the sight of her letter, and it lay beside her plate unread. She had never thought that Pamela would write to her, and she must put a stop to her letters for the future; it would be impossible under the circumstances to hold communication with Alick's sister.

'Humph—ah!' as Sir Godfrey's eyes fell on the letter, 'so you have heard from Bessie? I should have thought'—clearing his voice—'that Bessie would have written first to her mother; but times have changed—times have changed: young people like their own way. Well, and what does Miss Bessie say for herself?'

'My letter is not from Bessie, Grand.'

'Oh, what!' putting on his pince-nez, and looking suspicious all at once, 'not from Bessie? I was not aware—I was certainly not aware—that you had any other correspondent at Cromehurst.'

'My letter is from Pamela Lyall,' returned Gerda steadily. 'I have not read it yet, but I expect she wrote it because I was not able to bid her good-bye.'

Then a portentous frown came to Sir Godfrey's brow; he had killed the fatted calf—he had received his offending

grand-daughter with a kiss of peace—and she was secretly holding communication with the enemy. But Gerda was not abashed by her grandfather's frown, though Mrs. Meredith saw it and trembled.

'When I have read my letter I shall be able to tell you about it,' she said calmly. 'If you are disengaged after breakfast, I will come to you in the library.—Mother, you have made my coffee too sweet; I have been so long away that you have forgotten my tastes;' and then she looked at her mother with an encouraging smile. 'Don't be afraid, I can manage Grand,' the smile seemed to say, and Honoria felt a little comforted.

CHAPTER XLVI

'AT HEART I AM A REBEL'

'How many times we become hypocrites simply by remaining the same outwardly and towards others, when we know that inwardly and to ourselves we are different!'

'Life seems suspended, just when it is most intense.'

AMIEL.

'SHALL we have our little talk now, Grand?'

More than half an hour had elapsed, and Sir Godfrey was sitting in his high-backed chair by the library window trying to read his paper, but somehow the type was not so clear as usual that morning. He had polished his eye-glasses carefully, and had placed them firmly on his nose, and he had rung for Dalton to pull up the heavy Venetian blinds: was he growing old? he wondered. He would go up to town and consult some famous oculist. Perhaps the sunlight flickering and dancing through the leaves of the Virginia creeper dazzled him; he must ring for Dalton again—but here his grand-daughter's entrance stopped him.

'Is the light trying your eyes, Grand?' asked Gerda, perceiving at once the old man's discomfort; and without waiting for an answer she readjusted the offending blind. 'Shall I read to you presently when we have finished our talk?' and as she spoke she stroked his white head in her old way. Aunt Clare was right, she thought: her grandfather looked old and feeble.

Sir Godfrey cleared his throat; he was at a loss how to begin the conversation. Somehow the touch of those girlish fingers unconsciously softened him. Discipline must be

maintained, but he had no desire to renew hostilities. There might be some possible explanation; he would be cautious and invite confidence. And here he cleared his throat again, this time in a conciliatory manner; but Gerda was too quick for him.

'You were not good to me at breakfast, Grand,' she began reproachfully; 'in fact, you were very naughty.'

Sir Godfrey sat bolt upright in his chair and stared at her.

'You were very naughty indeed,' she continued calmly. 'You thought that I had no right to have a letter from Alick's sister; that I ought to have broken off all correspondence with Roadside; but it is all very simple. Pamela was away when I left Chesterton, and she has written to wish me good-bye. I must answer her, of course; but I will tell her not to send me any more letters. You see I am to be trusted, dear,' putting her hand affectionately on his shoulder.

'I am very glad to hear it,' returned Sir Godfrey stiffly —'I am exceedingly glad to hear it; an explanation is sometimes necessary. I was extremely surprised that Miss Lyall should write to you under the circumstances, but,' with a burst of magnanimity, 'I am quite satisfied—I may say I am perfectly satisfied;' and he took up his paper again, but Gerda stopped him.

'There is something else that I must say to you, Grand,' she went on quietly. 'When Alick told me that we must give each other up, I was very unhappy. It seemed to me such a hard thing to do. I was so proud to think that I had his love, and that so good a man cared for me; but when he pointed out that it was our duty, I was obliged to submit.'

'May I beg of you, Gerda, not to mention Dr. Lyall to me by his Christian name?' returned Sir Godfrey stiffly. 'It is extremely improper—I may say indelicate—under the circumstances, and I must request, I must insist, that you do not repeat it. Dr. Lyall is nothing now but a mere acquaintance, and you are never likely to meet——'

'I call him Alick,' returned Gerda, in a clear, thrilling voice, 'because he will always be Alick to me, and no other name comes naturally to me; but, all the same, I will be careful not to offend your ears. When you tell me he is a

mere acquaintance, you are wrong, and it is my duty to undeceive you. All my life he will be my nearest and dearest. Nothing will make me change to him—nothing.'

'Upon my word, Gerda, you shock me extremely!'

'I am sorry for that, Grand. It is not nice to shock people, but, all the same, it is best to tell the truth. He has sent me away from him, and I shall try to do my duty, but I cannot pretend to be happy. My mother understands what I feel, and she does not blame me. When she thinks of my father, she cannot help understanding me. After all, it is very simple—when one loves, it is for ever.'

'I am extremely shocked!' repeated Sir Godfrey, and his rigid old frame fully expressed this sentiment. 'I am grieved to the heart that my grand-daughter should be so wanting in that reticence, that modesty, which is so desirable in a young lady. I can scarcely believe my ears that you should tell me to my face that—that——'

Sir Godfrey's outraged feelings tried to find vent in some appropriate word, but as he hesitated, Gerda again interrupted him.

'Is it indelicate and improper to be faithful? Should I have promised to marry him—it must be "him" now—if I had not loved him? Do you suppose, Grand, that my affection was such a poor little thing that it could not resist the first touch of misfortune? No, a thousand times no! What impropriety could be so great as unfaithfulness? Grandfather'—her voice changing to deep sadness—'there is no use talking about this any more, for I fear we shall always differ. All my life I shall care for him, and my constancy will be my glory. If I do not see him for years, it will make no difference to me, or to him either, and it will be my hope that one day things may come right for us.'

'I am too much shocked to be able to answer you,' returned Sir Godfrey, who certainly was not equal to the occasion, and whose paucity of expression compelled reiteration. 'I must beg, I must insist, that you put a stop to this painful and improper conversation, which is making me positively ill.'

'You shall be obeyed,' returned Gerda gently, and, indeed, the girl's gentleness and dignity had kept Sir Godfrey in check all this time. As she stood there before him in her

slim young grace, with her clear, truthful eyes looking at him, he was at a loss how to answer her. In spite of his narrow bigotry, some softening influence seemed to creep over his old heart. What if the girl were right, after all, and love such as this were one of the eternal verities? The Hamlyns had always been faithful to their lovers—Gerda was only true to the traditions of her race. 'You shall be obeyed, grandfather,' she went on, but her voice trembled a little, and she grew strangely pale; 'I will never open my lips to you on this subject again. If I suffer, I will suffer in silence. But it is right that you should know my feelings —that at heart I am a rebel. But you need not fear; in my acts I shall be submissive. Doris will not be more obedient to you than I shall be;' and then she kissed him softly on his wrinkled forehead and left the room.

Sir Godfrey sat for a long time by the window, but he did not take up his paper again. Gerda's clear young voice had stirred up long-dormant memories in the old man's breast. He remembered—how many years ago was it?—poor pretty Susie; how fond he had been of her! It was a boy and girl love, and, well, he had not been faithful. He had married to please his father, and though Isabel had made him a good wife, he had not loved her as he had loved Susie. It gave him a pang even now, in his old age, to think of that parting in the orchard that summer evening—how they had kissed and clung to each other like two children.

Susie had never married; she had moped and pined and got thin. There was consumption in the family, but, of course, they told him that fretting had undermined her constitution. Not that he believed them, but, all the same, it had been a bad time for him when he had heard of her death. Clare was a baby then. He remembered how one moonlight night he had stolen to the churchyard just to see her grave. 'Susanna Bannerman, aged 19.' What a short, pitiful life! Simple, tender-hearted Susie! who knows what secret hopes the poor child had nourished? Perhaps in her innocent way she, too, had thought, with Gerda, 'that when one loves it is for ever.' Perhaps her guileless nature clung to the thought that Godfrey would be faithful to her, and it was only when they told her of his marriage that her courage and her strength had failed.

'Poor little Susie!' he mused; and when, a short time afterwards, Honoria entered the library, he spoke to her quite gently.

'Will you be good enough to read to me, my dear?' he said, in rather a subdued voice. 'My eyes are a little dim this morning; I think I must speak to Hewetson about them;' but before Honoria had read long he had fallen into a doze.

Gerda noticed with surprise that her grandfather's manner to her at luncheon was the same as ever; he was somewhat quiet, and noticed Clare less than he had yesterday.

'Poor little Susie!' he said more than once to himself, as he sat silently at the table.

Gerda was determined not to spare herself, and after luncheon she and Mrs. Meredith went down to the Rectory.

At the gate they encountered Mr. Allingham. He looked as boyish as ever. Two of the Hilton boys were with him.

'We were just coming to congratulate Frances,' observed Mrs. Meredith. 'We are all so glad to hear of the good news, though we shall be sorry to lose you, Mr. Allingham.'

'The Bishop has behaved like a brick!' returned Mr. Allingham cheerfully. 'Studley End is only fourteen miles from here, so Frances will not be far from her people. You will find her in the drawing-room; they are all there. Now, Jack, we must be off;' and Mr. Allingham raised his felt hat, and rushed off, followed closely by Jack and Bob.

Frances received their congratulations very quietly, but her soft brown eyes told their own story.

'She is very happy,' whispered Mrs. Hilton into Honoria's ear. 'She and Bertie are absolutely devoted to each other, and the Vicarage at Studley End is charming.'

'Dear Frances, I am so glad!' observed Gerda, as the two girls went out into the garden. 'We saw Mr. Allingham just now, and he seemed in high spirits. He says Studley End is only fourteen miles from here, so we shall be sure to see you often.'

'I hope so, for mother and the girls will miss me at first. Of course Bertie and I are very happy about this, for we were afraid that we might have to wait for years. But they say that the Bishop was so pleased with Bertie's sermon that he sent for him directly old Mr. Sturges died.'

'It is a dear little old-fashioned vicarage, is it not?'

'Yes; and the garden is lovely. Mr. Sturges spent so much on it. But, Gerda, we will not talk about that just now. I think it is so good of you to come and see me the first day after your arrival.'

'There is no goodness about it. Besides, I am to be your bridesmaid—that was always settled between us.'

'But I will not keep you to your promise, Gerda. If you like, Doris shall take your place.'

'Do you mean that Doris has cut me out?' asked Gerda, pretending to joke.

'You know what I mean,' returned Frances; but there were tears in the brown eyes now. 'Gerda, if you knew how sorry I am for you! And so are mother and the girls. We saw so much of Dr. Lyall when he was at Chesterton, and we all liked him so much.'

Then Gerda smiled almost happily.

'Yes, and he liked you too; he was quite pleased when I told him of your engagement to Mr. Allingham. I used to talk to him about you. Did—did Doris tell you about us?'

'Yes, I met her in the village on Thursday, and I saw at once that something was the matter. Doris can never hide things. Poor little thing! she cried so when she told me; and I cried too out of pure sympathy. Oh dear! oh dear! it does seem so dreadfully hard.'

'I knew you would be sorry for me.'

'Yes, and you are bearing it so beautifully. But one can see how you feel about it: there is such a troubled look in your eyes. When I saw you speak to Bertie at the gate, I thought I must run away and hide myself.'

'I should have been sorry if you had done that. And after all, nothing seems to matter. A trouble like this seems to put everything at such a distance. Yesterday, as we were driving from Darley, I felt as though there were two Gerdas. Myself—my hopeful, happy self—seemed missing, somehow. I had left it at Cromehurst.'

'Oh, you poor dear! But I understand what you mean. But there is mamma calling to us. I suppose Mrs. Meredith is ready to go.' And then they went back to the drawing room.

Other people noticed a difference in Gerda. A few days afterwards Mrs. Hake came up to the Hall with a basket of roses, and found Doris alone. Gerda had gone again to the Rectory to help Frances with some work, and Sir Godfrey was driving with his daughters.

'I suppose Mr. Hamlyn is out too?' asked Mrs. Hake presently.

'Yes, he is down at the Five Acre Field. They are carrying the hay. Gerda and I are going down there presently.'

'That will do Gerda good; she is looking ill. When she came up to Braeside my husband noticed the difference in her at once. I think your mother ought to take her abroad. There is nothing so good as a change of scene when a person is thoroughly hipped.'

'I do not suppose change of scene would do much for Gerda,' returned Doris discontentedly. 'She is far too miserable. Of course she tries to hide from us how unhappy she is, and she is as good and brave as possible. Why, she is working quite hard for Frances, and she helps mother, and is so nice and cheerful with Grand. But when she is not talking to us her face looks so sad. Gerard was only speaking to me about her yesterday.'

'Oh, he notices that she is out of spirits!' And Mrs. Hake's tone was a little peculiar.

'Of course he notices it; and he is as sorry as possible. We do nothing but think how we are to help her. Gerard gets quite furious with Grand sometimes. He says if we only had our rights Gerda could marry Dr. Lyall to-morrow. Gerard is so good!—he wants Grand to settle a nice little sum on each of us. But Grand always puts him off by saying that we shall have it on our wedding day.'

'That is so clever of Sir Godfrey. He means to keep the whip-hand of you all. But you will have to marry to please him. Doris, shall you be very angry with me if I ask Captain Everdean down again?'

'Captain Everdean is nothing to me,' returned Doris, blushing furiously. 'But I would much rather not, if you did not mind.'

Then Mrs. Hake burst out laughing.

'You would much rather not? Oh, you foolish little

child! And you think I don't guess the meaning of that! You have treated poor Lewis as badly as possible. Now, please don't cry about it,' as Doris's eyes grew large and woeful. 'Sir Godfrey shall certainly not put his finger into that pie. Pray what did Mr. Hamlyn think of your hard-heartedness?'

'Gerard was very kind,' returned Doris in a low voice.

'It strikes me Mr. Hamlyn is always kind. But there, I must be going. Well, I have your promise about Wednesday. Tell Gerda and Mr. Hamlyn that I shall count upon them. We will have all the Rectory people and the Pagets—their house is full just now—and the Comptons, and Brookes. In fact, my picnic shall be the thing of the season. Do you suppose Mrs. Glyn could be persuaded to come too?'

'I am afraid Aunt Clare is not strong enough for that.'

'Never mind! I will ask her for one of my Thursdays instead. Now, take my advice, Doris, and don't let Gerda mope. Moping never did anyone good.'

And with this parting admonition Mrs. Hake took up her empty basket, and departed in high good humour. She was quite satisfied with the aspect of things. Mr. Hamlyn was behaving very nicely. He and Doris still rode together, and Gerda had not yet been persuaded to join them.

'Doris looks very happy; so things are going on as well as one can expect,' thought the lively lady, as she entered her own gates; 'for, after all, Rome was not built in a day. And great haste is not always good speed in matters of wooing.'

Gerda made no objection when Doris told her about the Braeside picnic. She listened with a becoming share of interest when Doris descanted enthusiastically on the magnitude of Mrs. Hake's ideas. 'There is to be a band, and dancing by moonlight, and we are to have tea in the ruins'—the ruins being a dilapidated building supposed to be an old priory, with a bowling-green, which was often used as an impromptu ball-room; and the Priory Fête, as it was called, excited a great deal of interest among the young people of Chesterton

'Upon my word, Gertie, you do take life at a rattling pace!' observed Captain Hake admiringly—'garden-parties, tennis-parties, and picnics, not to mention dinner-parties *ad*

libitum. You must draw the line somewhere, old lady, or we shall be cleared out and landed in Queer Street.' But Captain Hake smiled humorously under his moustache, for he was not behind his wife in his love for gaiety.

'I suppose it would be bad taste to ask Dr. Lyall to come down for a week's shooting in September?' she asked with apparent seriousness.

'Well, rather; it would be too audacious altogether. Whatever put such a thing in your head?'

'Oh, the idea came to me. But you need not look so frightened, Lionel. The Lyalls are old friends, and I suppose we have a right to ask them if we like. Of course, we could not invite the Hall people while they were with us; but there is no reason why the poor man should be debarred from his shooting.'

'Then he must have it elsewhere. We could not do it Gertie. They would be meeting in the village and at church, and'—rather irritably—'we should have Sir Godfrey down on us. No, my dear. I do not often interfere with your plans, but I must put my foot down for once. Lyall is my friend, and I simply will not have it done!' And when Captain Hake spoke in this tone, Gertrude was always obliged to submit.

'You are very ill-natured, Lionel! The poor things would be so glad to meet; but there! you need not put yourself out, for Dr. Lyall would certainly decline our invitation. He is one of those uncomfortable people with a conscience, and I have no patience with him! Later on I may have Pamela, and I suppose even Sir Godfrey will not venture to object to that.'

Gerda was quite willing to go to the Priory Fête, or to any number of fêtes. It was all in the day's work, as she told herself, and very hard work, too. It was only idleness and leisure that she dreaded.

When she woke in the morning, she liked to think that every hour and moment would be occupied, to plan and parcel out all manner of self-imposed duties. She had never done any parish work, but now she went boldly to the Rectory and pleaded for some task to be assigned her; and she was somewhat rebellious when the Rector hesitated. Sir Godfrey was very particular with his grand-daughters,

and he had objected more than once when the Rector had suggested their teaching in the Sunday-school.

'I have Grand's consent, and mother's too, so you need not be scrupulous about employing me, Mr. Hilton,' she observed. And then Frances had come to her help.

'Gerda could take my class, could she not, father?' And the Rector had assented to this.

But when Horace Glyn came to fetch his wife home, he commented rather sadly on the girl's changed looks.

'She is working too hard this hot weather,' he said very sensibly; 'you ought to tell Honoria so.' But Clare held a different opinion; she had watched Gerda very narrowly all these weeks, and she knew that only occupation could allay her restlessness.

'It will be wiser to leave her alone, Horace. Honoria worries herself too much about her already. Gerda is certainly not looking well, and the heat oppresses her; but she would be worse if she allowed herself to give way.'

'Well, you may be right; a woman is the safest judge in such cases. But Lyall would be sorry if he could see her now; she is not the same girl that she was with us. Lyall is working far too hard himself.'

'Ah, that is wrong, and I shall tell him so. Horace, I have so enjoyed my visit, and my father and Honoria have been so good to me; but I shall be glad to be back with you and the children.'

'I need not tell you that I have wanted you pretty badly,' returned Mr. Glyn, with a smile, and then Clare went on with her packing.

CHAPTER XLVII

PHILOSOPHY VERSUS SENTIMENT

'Hope is not forbidden us, but peace and submission are the essentials.'—AMIEL.

GERDA felt the parting with her aunt Clare very keenly. They had always been a great deal to each other, but during the last six months the sympathy between them had perceptibly deepened. So much had happened during Gerda's stay at the Vicarage: Walter's departure for Queensland, and Clare's long illness, her own engagement and its sudden and painful termination—following closely on Hester's trouble and Ray's death. Never had six months been more eventful, and through it all her aunt Clare had been her constant companion, and latterly her charge. But by mutual consent they abstained from any special leave-taking.

'I am not going to make any pretty speeches, Gerda,' observed Clare, as they were waiting for the waggonette—'I know we are both too choky to indulge in them safely; but all the same I shall miss you more than I can say.'

'Not more than I shall miss you, Aunt Clare.'

'Perhaps not; but we must learn to do without each other for a time. If I see your friend, Gerda, what am I to say to him?' and she looked at the girl a little sadly.

'Tell him that I am well—quite well,' she returned quickly; 'but perhaps it would be better to say nothing. But you must give my love to Pamela—and—and my dear love to Hester;' and then the sound of the horses' hoofs

was plainly audible, and Mr. Glyn came into the room to fetch his wife.

'I should think Dr. Lyall will call upon us soon,' observed Clare the next day, as she was writing letters in her husband's study; and Mr. Glyn had assented to this. But a few more days passed and Dr. Lyall had not made his appearance at the Vicarage. Then one afternoon, as Clare was coming in at the gate, she heard quick footsteps behind her, and as she turned he accosted her.

'I have just been calling on your opposite neighbour,' he said, as they shook hands, 'and as I crossed the road I saw you turn the corner.'

'If you will come in I will give you some tea, Dr. Lyall; but I am sorry to say my husband and Bessie are out.' Then, after a moment's hesitation, he accepted this invitation.

'He is decidedly nervous,' thought Clare, as she rang the bell and ordered up the tea; 'and how thin and tired he looks!' And, to put him at his ease, she observed cheerfully: 'I hope you intend to congratulate me on my improved appearance. Mr. Glyn declared last night that I had grown quite stout.'

'I never saw you looking better,' he returned heartily; 'so you see my prescription was a right one. Country air and complete rest have certainly done wonders.'

'It was a most enjoyable holiday,' returned Mrs. Glyn. 'My father and sisters spoilt me dreadfully, and then I had delightful drives every day; but I think the best restorative was Walter's letter. He wrote in such capital spirits!' And then she gave him a brief *résumé* of the letter.

'I call that first-rate. You may depend upon it the lad will do well.'

Then Dr. Lyall's manner changed, and he asked a little gravely if Miss Meredith were quite well. Clare had been expecting this question for some time. She had not liked to mention Gerda's name, though he had looked at her more than once rather wistfully; but she thought it better to be perfectly frank with him.

'Well, no, I cannot say that Gerda is looking well. I think the heat has tried her a good deal, and she does far too much.'

'Has she consulted anyone?' Dr. Lyall's voice was

somewhat anxious. 'She was always rather delicate, and I think she ought to see a doctor.'

'Oh, there is no need of that,' returned Mrs. Glyn cheerfully. 'My sister suggested once sending for Dr. Reynolds, but Gerda would not hear of it. She is not really ill, only the close weather, and—and——'

Clare hardly knew how to finish her sentence.

'I understand,' he replied gravely.

'She is very good,' continued Clare impulsively.

The pained expression in Dr. Lyall's eyes touched her kind heart—she must say something to comfort him.

'You need not tell me that,' was his quick answer.

'Yes, she is very brave; she has taken up all her old duties, and some new ones also, for she has begged the Rector to give her some work. You may be quite sure my husband approves of that.'

'A little work will do her no harm.'

'Certainly not, and I have told her mother so more than once. My sister is a little too anxious about the girl. Gerda is very good to her grandfather; it is pretty to see her with him, and she manages him far better than my sister does. He is certainly very fond of her, although it is not his way to be demonstrative.'

'Is Mr. Hamlyn at the Hall?'

'Gerard? Oh yes, he is always at home; but he is very busy. I am glad to say,' after a brief pause, 'that he has fallen into his old brotherly ways with Gerda; so, of course, that is more comfortable for both of them. Are you going already, Dr. Lyall?'

'Well, I have an appointment at a quarter-past five. Thank you very much for telling me all this; it has done me good.'

'I am glad of that—you look as though you wanted something to do you good. Are you working too hard? I thought July was a slack time for doctors.'

'So it is generally. But Brown is away just now, and I have one or two bad cases.'

'I hope you intend to go away too.'

'By and by I intend to have a fortnight or three weeks in Cornwall with our cousins the Allcots. They have rather a nice place near Falmouth. Pamela is there now.'

'So Hester told me. Well, good-bye. I must not make you late for your appointment. You must come and dine with us some evening, and then you will be sure of seeing my husband.'

'Thanks; I shall be delighted.' But he spoke a little absently, and then he said rather hurriedly: 'If you are writing to your niece, will you tell her not to over-tax herself this hot weather? She has not the strength for it.'

'May I say that from you?'

'Why not? There is no harm in that, surely. Someone must look after her, or she will break down. You might remind her at the same time that she promised to take care of herself.' And then he took his leave.

Gerda felt positively happy the day she received that letter—the message gave her exquisite pleasure. It was like a kind hand held out to her across some deep chasm—it seemed to bridge the silence between them.

Gerda did her duty bravely, but the constant effort tried her, and she began to have a white, spent look towards evening. Mrs. Meredith used to make Doris her confidante.

'She is much thinner,' she observed, one sultry evening, when Gerda had made her weariness a pretext for retiring early to her room, 'and she eats next to nothing. Even your grandfather noticed her want of appetite at dinner.'

'No one can eat, this hot, thundery weather, mammie. I saw you had left nearly the whole wing of your chicken when Rogers took away your plate.'

'Oh, that was nothing; I was not hungry,' returned Honoria, who never magnified her own little ailments, though she was keenly alive to those of others. 'When people grow old they do not need so much food or sleep; when I was your age I had always a good appetite.'

'Oh, but, then, you were not crossed in love,' returned Doris shrewdly; and Mrs. Meredith owned with a sigh that this was the case.

'I think the effort she makes to appear cheerful does her harm. I wish I could speak to Dr. Reynolds about her. He is such a sensible doctor; and, then, he has known you both from children. He really saved your life, Doris, when you had whooping cough so badly. Dear, dear, what a miserable little object you were!'

Doris received this information with the indifference due to an oft-repeated story, and then she said decidedly:

'You must not send for Dr. Reynolds, mammie. It would only make Gerda angry; and, after all, he would do her no good. When a person is dreadfully unhappy a doctor is of no use.'

'Oh dear! oh dear!' sighed Mrs. Meredith. 'What are we to do with her, Doris?'

Then Doris gravely admitted that the question was too difficult for her solution.

'I think we shall have to leave her alone,' she returned sorrowfully. 'Gerard is better, so perhaps she will get better too.'

'The cases are utterly dissimilar!' retorted her mother impatiently. 'Doris, how can you be so childish? Gerda suffers a hundred times more than ever Gerard did. I do not believe, after all, that his affection for Gerda was ever very deep.'

'Mother'—and Doris looked quite indignant at this—'how can you be so unkind to poor Gerard? He was dreadfully cut up—he told me so himself; and I am sure he looked miserable enough.'

'Yes, I dare say,' returned Mrs. Meredith, who was certainly not wanting in common-sense. 'And I never said that Gerard was not fond of Gerda; but when you compare his affection with Gerda's for Dr. Lyall, it is utterly different. Gerda's nature is so much more intense than Gerard's.'

'Of course I know that, mammie;' but Doris's tone was a trifle hurt. Her mother's remark seemed somehow to disparage her idol. 'But Gerard has been so good and unselfish about Gerda, and he has tried his best to get over his trouble.'

'And very sensible, indeed, of Gerard, and I am glad to think that his efforts are rewarded, for really he has excellent spirits. Your Aunt Clare and I were noticing it, and when a man eats as Gerard does——' But here Doris became suddenly touchy, and, after a few more remarks on Gerard's admirable common-sense, Mrs. Meredith allowed the subject to drop.

'I wonder what makes Doris so very touchy when I mention Gerard?' she thought. 'Oh dear! I hope she is

not getting too fond of him. That is the worst of this sort of relationship; they are so much thrown together, and no one thinks anything of it. Doris is not a child now, and after Captain Everdean's affair one cannot be too careful. If I could only give Gerard a hint! But it would be so awkward; and I dare not speak to Doris—it would only put things in her head. How I wish Clare were here! she is so sensible and practical, and Gerda, poor darling! must not be worried. Oh dear! the responsibilities of a mother,' sighed poor Honoria, feeling as though her two young advisers had deserted her, and that she had no comfortable prop to sustain her. Honoria's conscience somehow always needed another conscience to assist its workings; she lacked backbone and firmness. This was why Dr. Lyall had gained an easy victory. He had insensibly moulded her plastic nature to his will, and made her look at things from his point of view. 'There is nothing like a man's opinion, after all,' she had once remarked to Gerda; 'he is sure to settle things so nicely and quickly.'

Time passes, as time will pass, however happy or unhappy people may be. During the shooting season, Gerard had relays of his friends as usual, and amongst them Charlie Seymour. He was staying at the Hall when Frances Hilton was married, and was one of the guests at the wedding; and in spite of a certain Captain Max Schreiber, Robina flirted with him in the most audacious manner. Gerda and Doris were both bridesmaids; but more than one person noticed Gerda's pale, careworn looks. 'Dear Gerda, I hope and trust it will all come right some day,' whispered the bride, as Gerda offered her kiss of congratulation; but to this Gerda made no audible answer; her heart was too oppressed for words. How sweet and happy Frances looked, with her young husband beside her! how bright Doris and the Hilton girls, with their attentive satellites round them! Gerard was looking after Doris, Charlie Seymour was fanning Robina, the elder ladies were nid-nodding and exchanging confidences with Mrs. Hilton. Outside the sunshine was gilding the meadows, the bells were ringing, there was a chorus of voices and laughter. Was she the only discontented one? she wondered; was she selfish, unkind? This was October—they were to have been married then; and

her gloved hands closed more tightly round her bouquet, as this thought passed through her mind. When she looked up, she met Gerard's eyes. He was watching her rather sorrowfully, but the next moment he was speaking to Doris.

The Hall was not empty of Gerard's guests until nearly Christmas, and, as Braeside was crowded, the season was unusually gay. Gerda took her part in all the festivities, but early in December she caught a severe cold, which threatened to settle on her chest, and Dr. Reynolds peremptorily forbade any further dissipation.

'She has run down and is rather weak, so the cold has got hold of her. No night air and no dances, if you please;' and Gerda readily promised obedience.

Doris began to condole with her when the doctor had taken his leave.

'It is really too trying,' she said impatiently. 'There is the Pagets' ball—Gerard says it will be a splendid affair; and then the theatricals at Ringwood.'

'Never mind,' returned Gerda cheerfully. 'Do not trouble about it, Doris. I would much rather stay at home quietly with Grand.'

'But you used to be so fond of dancing,' complained Doris querulously. 'But nothing pleases you now, not even the lovely dresses that Grand is giving us.'

'I am afraid you are right,' returned Gerda in a penitent voice; 'it is very disagreeable of me, but I do not seem to care about anything. Dancing tires me dreadfully now. I wanted to say "No" to everyone the other night. If you knew how I blessed dear old Dr. Reynolds just now! I am even thankful for my cold, because it gives me an excuse for staying at home. Why, Dorrie, you silly child, you are actually crying! How can you be so absurd?'

'I can't help it,' replied Doris, with a sob. 'I can't bear'—choking over her words—'to see you so unhappy. Grand is spoiling your life. You are breaking your heart about Dr. Lyall, and when it is too late they will all see it;' and here Doris, overcome by the gruesome picture she had painted to herself, buried her face in her handkerchief.

Gerda tried to laugh, but she was weak, and her voice was a little shaky.

'Doris, how can you be so foolish? Do put that ridiculous

handkerchief away and listen to me. It is not the first time in my life that I have had a cold on my chest.'

'I am sure'—another sob—'that you never looked so bad.'

'One always looks bad with a cold. Do, please, put this nonsense out of your head. You are wrong. I am not breaking my heart about Alick, and you must never say so again. I would not be so wicked. Of course I am dull—that is only natural, when I miss him so much; but I am far less dull when I am quietly at home with mother. Somehow, the fine dresses and dances and music seem to turn me sick. Alick never cared for gaiety or dancing, and I think I have lost my love for it, too.'

Doris looked only half convinced. Gerda's quiet, matter-of-fact explanation somehow clashed with her preconceived theories.

'Are you quite sure that you are not going to die?'

And then Gerda laughed outright, though the laugh was decidedly a hoarse one.

'Certainly not; what a goose you are! Do you suppose a little unhappiness kills people?'

Doris looked rather ashamed of herself.

'It does in books, you know. When people cannot marry the proper person they generally catch cold and die, unless they get run over or meet with some terrible accident.'

'Why do you read those ridiculous love-stories?' returned Gerda in a disgusted tone. 'They give you wrong views of life.'

'Do they, darling?'

'Of course they do. Why are people who are crossed in love more eligible for Paradise than other people? Why are they to be allowed to "shuffle off their mortal coil" in that comfortable, easy fashion, as though they had done something meritorious?'

'But they do die sometimes.'

'Then they were anæmic or consumptive, or they had weak hearts. Very little would kill people in that condition. If grief would kill, how many widows would die—ay, and gladly, too—instead of dragging on a sort of mutilated existence? No, Dorrie, we must not take up our lives in this irresponsible fashion. Alick would be ashamed of me,

and I should be doubly ashamed of myself, if I were to break down in that weak way.'

'I wish I could talk as beautifully as you do,' sighed Doris. 'But it is not only talk; that is the best of it.'

And then Roberts came in with a tempting little tray for the invalid, and with orders for Doris to get ready for her drive with Sir Godfrey.

'You had better put on a veil to hide your red eyes, or Grand will ask troublesome questions,' was Gerda's parting suggestion, and Doris nodded assent.

It was all very well for Gerda to make light of her ailments, but even Sir Godfrey fumed and fidgeted when the girl had been kept a close prisoner to the house for more than ten days.

'I think Reynolds is getting old,' he observed to his nephew in his usual contradictory way. 'His treatment is too old-fashioned; he is keeping her on slops. Now, a glass or two of champagne would do her a world of good.'

'I think Reynolds knows what he is about,' returned Gerard quietly. 'It is not only a cold—anyone can see that. When people are hipped, and have no spirit for anything, it does not do to let a severe cold settle on them.'

'What do you mean by that?'—suspiciously. 'The girl is all right; there is nothing wrong with her spirits.'

But Gerard only shrugged his shoulders in a meaning way. If his uncle chose to be blind, nothing would open his eyes. But he had a notion that the old man was not so dense as he chose to appear, and he was confirmed in this opinion when a few days later Sir Godfrey suggested a consultation, which was mildly pooh-poohed by Dr. Reynolds.

'Miss Meredith is decidedly better, and I expect she will be out by Christmas Day.'

'But she is looking ill—excessively ill. Mrs. Hake was quite shocked with her appearance yesterday; and she eats nothing—positively nothing.'

'Oh, we shall mend all that,' returned the doctor cheerfully. 'Miss Meredith is a trifle low.'

'Do you mean that there is anything on her mind?' And Sir Godfrey looked up very sharply.

'I was speaking of her physical condition, Sir Godfrey. Your grand-daughter is a little below par. As to the other

matter, as I am an old friend, I may venture to say that I have certainly observed a want of cheerfulness, but under the circumstances one cannot wonder at that.'

And then Dr. Reynolds buttoned up his coat and left Sir Godfrey to digest this unpalatable idea. Susie had died of a broken heart—at least, that was what they told him. But Gerda was of a stronger calibre; and, after all, there was no tendency to consumption in the Hamlyn and Meredith families.

Dr. Reynolds was right, and Gerda was present at the Christmas service, though Doris went alone to help with the church decorations. She still looked very white and weak, and Sir Godfrey watched her furtively under his bushy eyebrows, and more than once Gerard frowned uneasily.

'It is getting past a joke, and something must be done,' he said later on that night, when he and Doris were lingering by the hall fire for a few minutes.

'Do you mean about Gerda?' she asked. 'Oh, she is really better, Gerard. The service did her good, and she looks ever so much brighter. Mrs. Hake said so directly she saw her.'

'It is a very poor sort of brightness,' was the discontented answer. 'She is not a bit the girl she was, and no wonder. It is hard lines not to have heard a word of Lyall these six months.'

'Is it really six months, Gerard?'—in a startled voice.

'Of course it is. She and Aunt Clare came down in June, and this is Christmas Day. Look here, Doey, I have been waiting all these months, hoping that Uncle Godfrey would relent; but Gerda is so awfully good that he does not see what a trouble it is to her.'

'I think it is a matter of religion with Gerda, Gerard. She would think it wicked to mope and make other people miserable; she has often said so to me.'

'But, all the same, she must not suffer for her goodness. Do you know, I have got a plan in my head—— But no, I will not tell you now—it would take too long; but I should want your help.'

'Oh, you may be sure of me!' returned Doris innocently And Gerard coloured, and looked into the fire.

'But you might not approve. One can never be certain

about anything; but it will do no harm to have a talk. You had better not stay up any longer, Doey. I hear Rogers shutting up; and we have the Rectory party to-morrow.' And Doris reluctantly took the hint.

'I think he ought to be sure of me by this time,' thought Doris, as she walked down the dimly-lighted gallery. 'He might be certain that I would do anything for Gerda—and for him too,' finished an inner voice; but she took no notice of this. She lighted the candles on her toilet-table, and then went to wish Gerda good-night.

'It has been a nice day, and the service was lovely!' observed Gerda tranquilly. '"Peace on earth"—how beautifully Mr. Hilton preached on those words! After all, Doey, whatever happens to us—trouble, or pain, or disappointment—nothing need rob us of that. Don't you remember what Keble says?—

> "'Gathering from every loss and grief
> Hope of new spring and endless home."

I am so fond of those words! I think with peace and hope one can live through anything,' finished Gerda, with a smile.

CHAPTER XLVIII

GERARD'S DIPLOMACY

'A young girl's love is a kind of piety. . . . If there is anything in the world which gives us a sweet ineffable impression of the ideal, it is this trembling, modest love. To deceive it would be a crime.'—AMIEL.

DORIS found herself pondering more than once over Gerard's enigmatical speech that Christmas night. It was not so much his words—for they were exceedingly vague, and might mean anything or nothing—but his manner, that excited her curiosity. When he spoke of needing her help, he had become suddenly very red, and had seemed embarrassed.

But for some days Gerard offered no solution, and it struck Doris that he rather avoided her than otherwise. Certainly there was no more dawdling by the hall fire in the evening, and, on the pretext of business, he continued to absent himself a good deal from the family circle. The weather had turned suddenly cold, and the last day of the old year, the gray skies, and keen, nipping air, presaged a snow-storm. Nevertheless, it was on this inauspicious afternoon that Gerard proposed that Doris should accompany him to Lingfield, a small village mid-way between Darley and Chesterton.

Doris was at her embroidery-frame when Gerard made this proposition, and she stuck her needle at once into the canvas, and jumped up rather eagerly. But Mrs. Meredith, who was reading by the fire, very naturally raised an objection.

'My dear boy, it is far too cold for Doris to go out. Your uncle said just now that he was sure that it was going to snow.—Now, Doris, do sit down again. I will not have you expose yourself to such a wind.'

'It will snow, of course, but not before night,' returned Gerard easily. 'I don't think you need be alarmed, Aunt Honoria; the girls go out in all weathers.'

'Of course we do,' chimed in Doris; 'only mother has been so fussy ever since Gerda's cold.—Now, don't say another word, mammie, for it is no use. I am not made of sugar or salt, and the wind will not hurt me.—I will not keep you waiting long, Gerard, only boots are such tiresome things.' And Doris blew a kiss to her mother, and ran out of the room, while Mrs. Meredith, who was used to her girls getting their own way, took up her book again with a protesting shake of her head.

'We will walk fast, and it will not do her any harm,' observed Gerard. 'Doris is very strong; she does not take cold as easily as Gerda. If it comes on to snow we will turn back. I have a particular reason for wanting her company this afternoon,' finished Gerard a little awkwardly.

'Have you, my dear?' But Mrs. Meredith was thinking of an engrossing scene in her novel, and Gerard's significant tone was lost on her. 'I am afraid you spoil Doris; she is getting a little self-willed.'

But Gerard only laughed at this, and amused himself by trying to teach Zoë a new trick, while Mrs. Meredith went on reading tranquilly.

In an incredibly short time Doris returned in her neat walking-dress and smart little velvet hat. Gerard gave her a glance of approval, and went off to find Sultan.

'Good-bye, mammie dear. I am sure we shall enjoy our walk.'

'Good-bye. You are very naughty, Doris. I would much rather have you stay at home with me.' But Doris turned a deaf ear to this.

Honoria was certainly rather fussy with her girls, and if they had listened to their mother they would have missed many a healthful walk; but Sir Godfrey was on their side. 'For Heaven's sake, don't be such a molly-coddle, Honoria!' he would say. 'If the children go out in all weathers they

will grow strong and hardy, very different to the white, pasty-looking girls one sees in town.' And certainly Doris thrived under the regimen of fresh air and plenty of exercise; and though Gerda was more delicate, it had hitherto answered with her.

'What are you going to do at Lingfield, Gerard?' was Doris's first question, as they walked hastily through the village; but Gerard, who was in a brown study, was some moments before he answered.

'Oh, I want to see the vet. about the new cow—there is something wrong with her—but I shall not be ten minutes. It is a detestable afternoon after all. I hope you don't mind it, Doris?' And Gerard buttoned up his greatcoat.

'Oh, I am so glad to get out!' she replied brightly. 'The room was so hot, and I was so tired of my embroidery. I wanted Gerda to come and practise our new duets, but she said her head ached. Oh dear! something is always aching now,' she finished with a sigh. 'I don't think Gerda will ever be like her old self again.'

'Oh yes, she will. Look here, Doey, Aunt Honoria was right, and this wind is beastly. Would you like to turn back? We could go into the billiard-room; there is a capital fire there.'

'But you wanted to speak to Stapleton about the cow,' returned Doris, rather perplexed by this. 'I would much rather go on, Gerard; I don't mind the wind a bit. If you turn up the collar of your coat you will not feel it. I am as warm as possible in my furs.'

'All right, we will go on then. I don't mind it myself, of course. I wanted you to come because I thought we could talk without interruption, and there was something particular that I wanted to say to you.'

'Oh yes, I was to help you in some plan. You know you said something of that kind on Christmas night. I am so glad you are going to tell me all about it. I have wondered a dozen times what you meant.'

'You cannot guess, then?' and Gerard struck with his stick a little nervously at a passing fence.

They were on the highroad to Lingfield, and not a creature was in sight. He might go ahead now.

'I have not the ghost of an idea,' replied Doris innocently, 'so I cannot help being a little curious.'

'I am sorry for that,' returned Gerard gravely—he had looked grave ever since they had left the Hall. 'I am afraid you will be awfully surprised, then; but if I do not speak out you will not understand me.'

'Oh, I shall be sure to understand you,' was the confident answer; 'you need not be afraid of that.'

But Gerard, who certainly did not find his task an easy one, cut at the hedge again with his stick, and looked across the stubble fields rather gloomily.

Doris felt a little uneasy at this reluctance to speak, but she thought it better to leave him undisturbed—for she was a sensible little person in her way, and could always adapt herself to the moods of her companions—and the silence lasted for some minutes, and then apparently Gerard had found some timely inspiration.

'Look here, Doey,' his favourite way of commencing a conversation, 'we have always been good friends, you and I.'

'Oh yes, Gerard.'

'Dear friends, I might say, for I have always been fond of you; and I think during the last eight months, since we have been so much together, that I have cared for you a lot more. That sort of thing grows, don't you know.'

Doris blushed with delight; she had dimly suspected that Gerard was fonder of her than he used to be; but how delicious it was to hear him say so! It gave Doris an exquisite sensation to hear Gerard speak like this.

'I am afraid it may be rather a shock to you to know this. After all I have told you, it may seem to you that I am fickle and changeable and all that sort of thing; but I am not the only fellow in the world who has done it, and you were so awfully good to me;' and here Gerard tried to clear his voice, for it was a trifle husky.

'I don't understand,' stammered Doris, who was beginning to feel rather giddy; 'I—I never thought you changeable, Gerard.'

'No; but you may think so, when you clearly understand what I mean. I am rather beating about the bush, don't you know, that you may not be startled; but, of course, it is no use. I shall have to say it outright. Doey,

do you think you can care for me well enough to marry me?'

Gerard had certainly spoken out now, but Doris only stared at him blankly. Had the sky fallen? Was the ground firm beneath her feet? He might well call it a shock—she fairly reeled under it—and yet she mechanically went on walking.

'Gerda would not have me, you know.' No answer, only Doris's fresh colour had suddenly faded. 'She was too clever for me—I was not her sort; and, after all, I believe she was right. We might not have hit it off. I made up my mind long ago that it was all for the best, and then somehow it came into my head'—and here Gerard got confused and floundered a little—'that—that we might suit each other better, don't you know; and when that fellow Everdean came down, I longed to kick him.'

'Oh, please don't!' and here Doris stood still. She felt that she could not move another step. 'Please don't say any more; it makes me quite giddy. I am so stupid, and—and you cannot mean it.' And here Doris collapsed utterly, and leant in a breathless manner against a stile they were passing.

'I mean every word of it,' returned Gerard stoutly, and he took the little gray-gloved hands as he spoke.

Gerard was not so ignorant about girls as he supposed himself to be. If Doris meant to refuse him, she would have acted differently. How indignant she had been with Captain Everdean! No, the poor little thing was half dazed; he had been too sudden with her. Why, she was trembling all over, and he was compelled to put his arm round her. The moment he did so Doris buried her face on his shoulder. Happily there was no one to behold this unusual sight but a couple of cows, and a hen or two.

'Oh, Gerard, it is impossible!'

'What is impossible—that you can care for me? I hope you do not mean to tell me that?' But there was no doubt in Gerard's tone.

'No, of course not; but after Gerda—oh, you know what I mean.'

'I can guess; but you are never to say such a thing again. It is quite different. I will explain it to you some

day. Doey,' bending down and speaking very gently, 'you said once that you wanted to comfort me.'

'So I do,' in rather a choked voice.

'Well, if you will marry me, I shall be the happiest fellow in the world. I am quite sure of that. Don't you think'—very persuasively—'that we should get on first-rate together?'

'Y-e-s!'

'Then it is settled. Come, I want you to look at me and tell me so.' And, thus adjured, Doris raised such a blushing, happy face that Gerard felt as though a sunbeam had suddenly gladdened his eyes, and he knew he had done the right thing. Doris was rather shy at first, but she soon got over it. It was impossible to be shy long with Gerard.

'What made you think of it?' she asked presently, when they were walking back from Lingfield. The first few flakes of snow were falling, but neither of them noticed them. 'I want you to tell me what first put it into your head.' But Gerard could not be induced to answer this question.

'You are far too curious,' he said at last, when she became rather pressing.

'But I have a right to know things now, haven't I?' she said pleadingly. 'Frances told me that she and Mr. Allingham had no secrets from each other.'

'I would rather not tell you this, darling, but I will promise to have no more secrets.' And then Doris smiled at him happily. Gerard might have a hundred secrets and she would have given him no trouble, for Doris had the sweetest and least suspicious disposition in the world.

'But you have never told me about your plan,' she observed by and by. 'Gerard, you have only been talking about me, and we have forgotten about poor Gerda.'

'Well, I was obliged to settle all that first, or my plan would have no foundation; that is why I said we should want plenty of time for our talk. We will come to the second part now; that is where your help will come in. Now listen to me, Doey; I want you to take this in very carefully. When you go home you must tell Uncle Godfrey that I have proposed to you, and that you will consent to marry me on the full understanding that Gerda is allowed to marry Dr. Lyall.'

'Oh, Gerard!'

'Well, my sweet, surely you do not object to that; you want to help Gerda as much as I do.'

'Yes, of course, but I have just promised without any condition.'

'Oh, that is between us two. You do not suppose that I shall let you back out of your promise; but you need not tell Uncle Godfrey that we understand each other.'

'Hadn't you better tell him yourself?'

'If you dislike it too much I will do so, and anyway I will back you up; but I thought it would come better from you.'

'I'll try. What shall I say, Gerard?'

'Oh, you need not say much; say, "Gerard has asked me to marry him, and I have been thinking over it, and if you will promise to help Gerda to marry Dr. Lyall I will be Gerard's wife."'

'I could not say that if you were in the room.'

'Then I will wait outside, and come in with a flourish of trumpets. You must not mind if I put it rather strongly. I shall tell Uncle Godfrey that you absolutely—absolutely, mind—refuse to marry me unless he will smooth the way for Gerda and Lyall.'

'Oh, Gerard!'

'I must put it strongly, you see.'

'But it is not quite true.'

'Ah, we will make it true. I tell you what, Doey—we will not be properly engaged until Uncle Godfrey accepts our terms: he must settle five thousand pounds on Gerda. Her dowry must be the same as yours. I have told him this over and over again; it is only fair, and I hate injustice.'

'I don't want Grand to give me any money,' rather piteously.

'But you must have your rights, and Gerda must have hers too. I am not going to stand any more of this nonsense. You must be firm, Doey, as firm as iron, and I will back you up.'

'And we are not engaged?'

'No, not regularly; but you will see it will all come right, and it will not hurt us to wait for a few days. We shall

be quite sure of each other.' And as Gerard looked at her in his frank, kindly way, Doris felt ashamed of her momentary selfishness.

'It was so horrid and wicked of me,' she said afterwards to Gerda, when the time came for a full confession, and she was relating all the events of this wonderful day; 'but I did feel a pang of disappointment when Gerard said that we must not be regularly engaged. It seemed to spoil things, somehow; but of course he was right—he always is.'

'But you were so good and managed so beautifully,' was Gerda's soothing answer; 'and you never have been selfish in your life, Dorrie. It was only natural that you should have felt a little damped when Gerard said that.'

Whatever reluctance Doris felt, she bravely resolved to carry out Gerard's scheme, and, with her usual habit of identifying herself with all his interests, she soon worked herself up to believe in this wonderful stroke of diplomacy.

'It is so clever of you to think of this,' she whispered, caressing his coat-sleeve under cover of the falling snow, which might have been a shower of roses for her.

'I fancy I have hit on the right thing,' he returned in a satisfied voice. 'Now, Doey, you must remember to be very careful. No one must guess our secret until we have talked to Uncle Godfrey.'

'I must not tell mother?'

'Certainly not.'

'Nor Gerda?'

'My dear child, Gerda must be the last person to hear. It will only be for a little while.' And of course Doris promised to be careful. What would she not have promised Gerard?

Mrs. Meredith and Gerda were sitting by the hall fire when Stephens admitted them. Gerda uttered an exclamation as two white figures appeared from behind the screen. Doris looked like a little snow-woman, and even Gerard resembled a shaggy Polar bear.

'I told you so,' observed Mrs. Meredith in a tone of despair, while the culprits laughed and shook themselves. 'You will have a dreadful cold to-morrow, Doris.'

'I am as warm as a toast,' returned Doris brightly. 'We never felt the snow, did we, Gerard?—How is your head

Gerda? You look dreadfully pale.' Doris was talking fast, as she always did when she was nervous, and tugged at her wet gloves.

Gerard came to her assistance very naturally.

'Is Uncle Godfrey in the study, Aunt Honoria?'

'Yes, dear. Mr. Hilton is with him.'

'What an awful nuisance!' growled Gerard under his breath, while Doris flashed a quick look at him. 'I suppose he means to stay to dinner?'

'No; he seems in a great hurry. Doris love, do go upstairs and get your wet things off. I am sure it must be more sleet than snow, for your hat is dripping.' And as Gerard's lip formed the word 'Go,' Doris instantly obeyed.

But before she was half-way across the gallery, she heard him following her.

'Hurry up, there's a dear,' he said coaxingly; 'get dressed as soon as you can, and I will let you know the moment the Rector has gone. When you hear me whistle "God save the Queen," you had better come down sharp—you do not really mind?' looking at her narrowly, for Doris's cheeks were not quite so pink as they had been just now.

'No, not much.' Doris could not truthfully say more, but the next moment she started away from him. 'You must not do that,' she faltered.

'Do you mean I must not kiss you?'

'Of course not. We are not engaged—you said so yourself.'

'Yes, but I never meant to be kept at a distance,' he returned ruefully. 'We are all right between ourselves.'

'But—but mother does not know.' And then Gerard laughed and let her go.

'She is the sweetest thing on earth,' he said to himself as he went to his room. 'I wonder why I did not find that out before. What an innocent little soul she is!—she will not be happy until her mother knows all about it; but we shall not have to keep it long dark. I am quite sure of that.'

CHAPTER XLIX

SIR GODFREY IS LATE FOR DINNER

'Haste and rashness are storms and tempests, breaking and wrecking business; but nimbleness is a full fair wind, blowing it with speed to the haven.'—Dr. Thomas Fuller.

Doris had just put the finishing touches to her toilet, when she heard Gerard harmoniously whistling the patriotic tune which he had selected, and she ran down so quickly that she was a little breathless when she entered the study.

Sir Godfrey was standing on the rug, in what Gerard called his Parliamentary attitude, with his legs a little apart and his right hand thrust into the breast of his coat. He had just been arguing with the Rector and had carried his point, and his success had put him into good-humour.

'So you have come back, Dorrie,' he said, greeting her with an affectionate smile. 'Rogers tells me it is snowing fast, and that you cannot see a yard before you. What on earth made Gerard drag you out on such an afternoon?'

'He wanted to talk to me,' stammered Doris. 'Grand, there is something I have to tell you, and which, I think, will surprise you very much indeed;' and here she came to a dead stop, and crushed her fingers together rather nervously.

Sir Godfrey regarded her benignantly, while poor Doris felt herself growing hotter and hotter.

'Why, the child is actually blushing!' he said to himself. 'I wonder if young Everdean has had another try?' And his voice softened as he said: 'Tell me all about it, my little girl. You look as though something wonderful has happened'

'So it has—a thing so wonderful that I can hardly believe it myself! Gerard has asked me to marry him.'

Sir Godfrey was a little deaf; he thought he had not got the name right: he had always been under the impression that his mother called him Lewis.

'Did you hear me, Grand?'

'I don't think I understand you, child. Were you speaking of Everdean?'

'Captain Everdean!'—quite shocked. 'Oh no, Grand! Whatever put that into your head? Gerard, I said—Gerard has asked me to marry him.'

Then Sir Godfrey sat down in his high-backed chair, and a wonderful brightness came into his old eyes. This was grand news indeed!

'Come and sit beside me, Dorrie, my dear,' he said very gently; but she shook her head.

'Presently, Grand; but I must say something else first. Gerard told me—that is, I have promised to marry him if Gerda marries Dr. Lyall.'

Then Sir Godfrey drew his eyebrows together.

'Your sister's engagement is broken off,' he returned coldly; 'Dr. Lyall did it himself. It is no business of mine.'

'But it can come on again; and you can make it your business,' pleaded Doris. 'And I cannot say "yes" to Gerard unless poor Gerda is happy too. No, Grand,' her voice becoming steady as she repeated her lesson more perfectly, 'I have quite decided that I will not be engaged to him unless you will help Gerda and Dr. Lyall.'

'You are talking nonsense, and I am surprised at you!' returned her grandfather sharply; and then he checked himself. If this were true—if Gerard had actually transferred his affections to Doris—the great wish of his life would be fulfilled, after all, and one of his grand-daughters would be the future Lady Hamlyn. 'You are talking foolishly,' he went on in a milder voice. 'There is no occasion to drag in your sister's affair; we can talk of that presently. I am far more interested in what you have told me. So that is why Gerard took you out this snowy afternoon. He is a shy fellow—Master Gerard. Not one of us had a suspicion of this.'

'I did not know it myself, Grand'—looking down.

'You were taken by surprise, eh?' in high good-humour. 'You never expected a fine fellow like Gerard to fall in love with you. Everdean does not hold a candle to him.' 'No indeed:' rather indignantly, 'there is no one like Gerard.' Then Sir Godfrey positively chuckled with satisfaction. Doris had unwittingly betrayed herself. 'And so you mean to wear the Hamlyn diamonds, and take possession of the Ladies' Gallery?' he continued, looking at the demure, blushing little girl before him. 'Well, we shall see—we shall see! I may prove a doating old grandfather yet.'

'Grand,'—waking up suddenly to the conviction that she had been incautious, and aware that footsteps were approaching the library door—'you are making a mistake; you are going too fast. I like Gerard; I—I love him very much; but I will not marry him—I will marry no one unless you will promise to help Gerda.'

'Bravo!' whispered Gerard, who had now entered, and he made a motion as though he were softly clapping his hands; but aloud he said; 'She is perfectly right, Uncle Godfrey, and I cannot blame her for her decision, though it is hard lines for both of us. I am wanting to be settled myself; but I should think it bad taste to urge her against her will. Our marrying will depend on you. It is like a scene in a play, Uncle Godfrey. Here are two young couples, waiting for the unnatural parent to relent. It is for you to play Providence, and to make everyone happy—that is what you have to do,' finished the irrepressible Gerard, who even at this crisis of his life refused to be solemn.

Sir Godfrey drew himself up in his most stately manner. If Gerard were going to treat the matter in this fashion, and to carry off things with a high hand, he would prove to him that he was not to be coerced and threatened. Doris was young enough to be managed. He would reason with her again.

'Doris, my dear, you have just told me that you care for Gerard. Is this the truth?'

'Yes, Grand.'

'Of course she cares for me, Uncle Godfrey!' interrupted Gerard, in an off-hand manner. 'We both care for each

other. But, all the same, Doris will not have me unless Gerda is allowed to marry Lyall. She has a soft heart, and she will not be happy herself unless Gerda is happy too.'

'Gerard is quite right,' returned Doris, gaining courage with the beloved presence, and only anxious to carry out Gerard's plan. 'I have made up my mind, Grand. Nothing will induce me to be engaged to Gerard unless poor Gerda is engaged too.'

'It is no use arguing with her, Uncle Godfrey,' observed Gerard in a friendly manner; 'Doris is very firm.'

'And I have made up my mind,' annotated Doris.

'We do not wish to press you unduly, Uncle Godfrey, but I should be glad myself if you would solve the difficulty for us. When a fellow is my age, he knows whether he wants a wife or not, and I think Doris and I would be very happy.'

'And what prevents you being happy, may I ask?' retorted Sir Godfrey testily. I am quite ready to give my consent, and you may be sure of her mother's approbation. There is nothing to prevent your being married. Doris will have her dowry, and I will make things straight for you.'

'Thanks awfully! You are very good.—Doris,' turning to her with hypocritical gravity—'you hear what Uncle Godfrey says: will you listen to reason, and put all this worrying business of Gerda and Lyall out of your head, and be engaged to me without any condition?'

'No, Gerard.' But Doris dared not raise her eyes from the ground.

'You won't have me?'

'Oh I mean—— No, Gerard—not on any account.'

'You hear her, Uncle Godfrey?' triumphantly. 'Doris is a Hamlyn: she is terribly firm.'

'You seem to me to applaud her firmness,' returned his uncle dryly.

'So I do,' returning to his natural manner. 'I admire and love her all the more for her affection for her sister. It shows she has a good heart, and I honour her for it!' finished the young man, with real reverence in his tone.—'Doris dear'—taking her hand—'I will not try to shake your resolution; we are agreed on that point, for you have right on your side. It is for Uncle Godfrey to help us all,

and to show his kind heart.' And then he whispered to her that she had done her part well, and that she might leave him; and Doris was too thankful to be set free.

'Upon my word, sir'—regarding his grand-nephew sternly—'I believe this is a conspiracy to coerce and compel me to change my mind! That child was not straightforward in the answers she gave you. It is my belief that you have put her up to it.'

This was awkward, inasmuch as it was true: but Gerard felt that he was not bound to criminate himself. He must get out of the difficulty as neatly as he could.

'I don't see that we need go into that question, Uncle Godfrey. As I said before, I think Doris is perfectly right, and I shall not attempt to shake her resolution. The matter is now in your hands. I do not mind owning that I am rather anxious to settle, and if we could only get Gerda's affairs arranged, I believe I could get Doris to marry me any time. It is rather awkward for us both, going on like this, and I am afraid, unless you give in to us, that I shall be obliged to have my diggings elsewhere.' This was Gerard's trump card, and as he played it he glanced at his uncle to see what impression he had made. But Sir Godfrey only fidgeted on his seat. 'I believe I have stated the whole thing,' went on Gerard in a leisurely voice; 'but there is no need for you to make up your mind in a hurry. Just think over it, Uncle Godfrey, and let us know your decision in a few days.'

'Upon my word, Gerard, you are a cool hand!' returned Sir Godfrey irritably. 'You think I am an old fool, who can be easily managed; but I beg to tell you—I beg to tell you that things cannot be settled in this off-hand fashion. Have you no regard for the cousin that you professed to love'—here Gerard perceptibly winced—'that you wish her to marry a beggar?'

'A very honourable beggar, Uncle Godfrey—the very ideal of a beggar, I should say; but I fancy you are putting it a little too strongly. Lyall is only under the pressure of a temporary embarrassment, which his own generosity brought upon him; and if you will consent to settle five thousand pounds on Gerda——'

But here Sir Godfrey interrupted him impatiently.

'I shall do nothing of the kind, Gerard. Pray, why should I reward Gerda for her disobedience? If she chooses to marry the man who has just discarded her, that is her affair, but she shall have no encouragement from me. Doris' —in a more complacent tone—'is different. Doris shall have all I can afford to give her.'

'Look here, Uncle Godfrey,' and Gerard's tone waxed wrathful, 'neither Doris nor I will submit to this injustice. I suppose you will say that you have a right to do as you will with your own money; but you cannot live for ever, and I vow, if I am ever master here, that Gerda shall have every penny that rightfully belongs to her;' and Gerard brought down his hand smartly on the table.

The two men were growing hot over their argument. Sir Godfrey was fast losing his temper, and even Gerard was somewhat excited, when an interruption occurred. Mrs. Meredith came into the room with a tranquil remark on the lateness of the hour, but she looked somewhat taken aback when Sir Godfrey merely glared at her.

'Is—is there anything the matter, father?'

This was enough; this was sufficient to rouse the smouldering embers of wrath that Sir Godfrey was vainly trying to repress.

'Anything the matter!' he burst out; and then the story was told in Sir Godfrey's own peculiar style.

Mrs. Meredith seemed staggered at first.

'Gerard and Doris!' she kept saying over and over again; 'you cannot mean Doris, father. I am sure you are making some mistake.'

'Don't be too crushing, Aunt Honoria,' returned Gerard, in a shamefaced manner. 'Of course it seems strange to you at first, but it has come about quite naturally. It was not our fault that we were thrown so much together; and, then, Doris was so awfully good to me when I was down on my luck. I don't see how I could help myself.'

'My dear boy—my dearest boy! you must not think that I am not excessively pleased,' replied Honoria, who was much touched by this confession; 'I was only thinking of my little Dorrie. She seems such a child, and——'

'Tut! nonsense! Don't be ridiculous, Honoria! Doris is no more a child than your mother was when I married

her. I hate that sort of false sentiment. But there you are—running off the line like a silly woman, and congratulating Gerard, when the young fool has just told me that he and Doris are going to make martyrs of themselves!' And here Sir Godfrey gave a lengthy and indignant explanation.

But he and Gerard were both surprised at the way Honoria received the news. Before Sir Godfrey had finished, her eyes had lost their soft look, and she turned upon her father almost fiercely, her voice tremulous with excitement.

'Father, this is too much! I will not bear it. Both my children to be unhappy—it shall not be! I will not suffer it!'

'Honoria!'

'It is no use talking to me; there are some things that are too hard for a mother to bear. Father, I have told you before they are my children, not yours—mine and Algy's. My little Dorrie—Baby, as we used to call her—shall not be unhappy. If she and Gerard love each other they shall not be separated.'

'Who wants to separate them, I should like to know? Are you out of your senses, Honoria?'

'But you tell me that Doris will not be engaged to him unless Gerda is engaged too, and yet she loves him. Father, there has been enough of this tyranny. For six months I have watched my poor child. Gerda is losing her health; if we are not careful she will go into a decline;' and Honoria burst into tears. 'And now my Doris is to be sacrificed too!'

'Pooh! nonsense! Do you expect me to believe such a pack of rubbish, Honoria?'

Gerard wisely held his peace; he had found an ally unexpectedly.

'I am only telling you the truth, father. Even Dr. Reynolds says Gerda is very delicate.'

'She has always been delicate, but there is nothing amiss with her. You are all in a league to thwart and badger me. So you wish your daughter to marry a beggar, madam?'

'He is not so dreadfully poor; and if they care for each

other, father—I would have married Algy if he had not had a penny in the world,' finished the widow solemnly.

Her young husband had been in his grave for many years, but his memory was as dear to her as ever.

Sir Godfrey cleared his throat uneasily; he was growing tired of the argument, and, worse than that, he was growing old. He wished that they would not pester him any more just now; he wanted to think over things a little. Perhaps, if he were alone, he might find some solution. In spite of his obstinacy, Gerard's firmness had made an impression on him. His mind was made up on one point—that he must marry Doris. He would not be fooled by another grand-daughter.

'I shall be obliged to you, Honoria, if you will drop the subject for the present,' he began rather feebly; and then the gong sounded, and his manner instantly changed.

Dinner—and he had not dressed! Dalton would be waiting for him all this time! This was a moral earthquake indeed. He must be in his dotage—his brain must be softening.

'I think I shall mention it to Reynolds,' he thought, as he went off in nervous haste, followed by his daughter.

To be half an hour late for dinner, to meet Rogers' reproachful look as he entered the dining-room, to incur Morgan's wrath for spoiling her entrées, had never before happened to Sir Godfrey. 'Accidents will happen in the best regulated family,' but he could not get over it.

'I shall certainly mention it to Reynolds,' he repeated. 'Loss of memory is a well-known symptom.'

Sir Godfrey had other symptoms, which would have puzzled Dr. Reynolds if he had known them. He ought to have been exceedingly angry with Gerard, and annoyed with Doris, but somehow his wrath had evaporated.

As he passed the red-baized door that led to the suite of apartments that his wife had occupied, and that was always called the Ladies' Gallery, his eyes brightened for a moment. 'Who would have thought it of the child?' he muttered; and then Dalton appeared with a face of grave concern that brought his delinquency to Sir Godfrey's mind.

'What can have happened to Grand?' observed Gerda

innocently, as Gerard strolled into the hall; 'Rogers has been in twice to look for him.'

'Oh, he'll be down directly; he and Aunt Honoria were talking, and they forgot the time;' and then he spied Doris snugly hid away on a distant settle, with Sultan's head on her lap. She turned an anxious face as he approached.

'Tired, darling?'—in a whisper. And then he sat down and took the warm little hand in his. Gerda was reading—she did not notice them; no word of that low-toned talk could reach her ears. 'It will all come right; I am sure of that,' he said comfortingly, and Doris was glad to believe him.

Gerda could not understand why everyone seemed so strange during dinner. Sir Godfrey sat at the bottom of the table frowning and fussing: the entrée was ruined, and the game was overdone; the vegetables were cold, and he could eat nothing; but he asked for some champagne, and insisted on Doris having a glass.

Gerda felt surprised; then she noticed that Doris certainly looked very tired and fagged. And no wonder, for the poor child had gone through an ordeal since luncheon. The interview with Sir Godfrey had cost her a painful effort. Gerard, too, looked excited, and her mother had evidently been shedding tears. Gerda could not make it out at all.

It was not until bedtime that Doris enlightened her. They had both accompanied their mother to her room—at least, Gerda had accompanied her; Doris had been captured by Gerard, and only followed them after a few minutes. Something in her young sister's appearance seemed to strike Gerda; perhaps it was the softness in her eyes or the blush on her cheek.

'What is it, Dorrie?' she asked affectionately; 'you look very happy to-night.' And then it all came out.

Gerda was much agitated as she listened. This had always been her wish, that Gerard should care for Doris. He had been Doris's idol, she knew that well; but she knew also that Doris, in her humility, had never dreamed of this: the gift of Gerard's love had come to her as a sweet and glad surprise.

But Gerda's emotion increased as she heard from her mother's lips of Gerard's generous plan, and Doris's courage in carrying it out. Her eyes glistened.

'Oh, you darling!' she said softly, as Doris kissed her, and assured her that all would come right—Gerard had said so.

'She has been very good,' agreed Mrs. Meredith.

'Good!—she is always good. Dorrie, you must tell Gerard that I shall love him all the better for this; he is my own dear brother now, you know;' and Gerda stroked Doris's curly hair. 'I always knew you would suit him much better than I could have done.' And this speech made Doris very happy.

'He is far too good for me,' she whispered; but neither her mother nor Gerda would allow this for a moment. Gerard was very nice, but what could be too good for their cherished little one? Doris had always been the pet of the house—the very servants spoiled her; she was so simple and sweet-tempered, her nature was so unselfish and loving, that it was no wonder that she was a general favourite.

'But you must not think for a moment that I shall allow you and Gerard to sacrifice yourselves in this ridiculous fashion,' went on Gerda, trying to laugh, but speaking out of a full heart. 'Of course you are engaged, Dorrie, and of course Grand is too sharp not to see through things. You must leave me and Alick alone, and just think of yourselves.' But Doris contradicted this very decidedly, and the generous contest went on, until Mrs. Meredith put a stop to it by telling them that it had long chimed midnight.

CHAPTER L

AN UNFORESEEN CONTINGENCY

'Opportunity has hair in front, behind she is bald; if you seize her by the forelock you may hold her, but if suffered to escape, not Jupiter himself can catch her again.'—*From the Latin.*

Two or three days passed, and still Sir Godfrey made no sign; but Gerard took the matter very coolly: he had made up his mind that things would come right, and the slight delay did not trouble him.

'We must give him time, you know,' he would say to Doris, in those brief interviews when they exchanged confidences; for while matters were in this unsettled state Mrs. Meredith kept the girl under her own wing, and Gerard found himself sadly curtailed in his love-making. 'We must give him time. Uncle Godfrey is always rather slow in coming to any conclusion.'

In truth, Sir Godfrey found himself sadly perplexed. He was growing old, and a divided household was not to his taste. His daughter, his much-enduring, meek-spirited daughter, had ranged herself on the side of her children, and was ruffling up her maternal feathers after the manner of a motherly hen. He could no longer count on her submission. The weakest thing in creation will show fight for her young, and Honoria had suddenly turned valiant. In spite of his pride, he was sorely tempted to yield. The idea of seeing his little Dorrie, his round-faced, smiling little girl, established in the Ladies' Gallery, and wearing the Hamlyn diamonds on her pretty white neck and arms, allured his imagination.

Then, again, Gerard's threat of leaving the Hall had made him wince. Gerard had become more necessary to him of late than ever. He had grown impatient of his brief absences. The young Squire's vigorous memory, his ready good-humour and common-sense, were all valuable to the old man, who felt the languor and incapacity of age stealing over him. If Gerard were married and settled comfortably under his roof, there would be no more talk of other diggings. He would take all the cares of the estate off his shoulders, and Sir Godfrey could sit in his arm-chair in peace. Before he closed his eyes he might see Gerard's children climbing about his knees. No wonder this picture, so patriarchal and pathetic, pleased him.

True, there was that odious condition that he should withdraw his opposition to Gerda's engagement with Dr. Lyall. Nay, more, that he should make her marriage possible by endowing her with a sum of money equal to her sister's portion. It was a preposterous notion, it revolted his autocratic, conservative soul; but all the same he hesitated.

Sir Godfrey's nature was an arbitrary one, but his heart was good. Gerda's changed looks had filled him with secret uneasiness. He had no idea that things had gone so deep with her; he had treated her affection for Dr. Lyall as a girl's fancy. She would get over it, very probably. The day would come when she would thank him for his firmness. Girls did not often know what they wanted; they needed a tight hand and guidance. But his eyes were not too dim to note the traces of deep-lying sadness on Gerda's pale face, and in spite of himself her quiet patience and absence of complaint touched him.

He liked her courage. She came of a good stock, who would have thought it cowardly to yield to despondency. She had thrown herself into her ordinary pursuits with her usual energy; she had walked and talked and danced as though all was well with her, and as though her young heart were not heavy within her. He liked this; it showed she had real grit in her.

But what if her mother were right, and the effort were too great for her? And then he thought of Susie, who had so slowly and surely pined away; and here his fine old face twitched with emotion.

'I shall have to yield,' he said half aloud.

He was sitting in his chair by a blazing fire as he said this, and as he spoke he stretched out his thin, ivory-coloured hands as though to warm their chilliness. Outside, the snow lay deep upon the ground; the wide-spreading cedar was encrusted and laden with whiteness, the sky was gray and heavy, and there was a still keenness in the air.

'I shall have to yield,' he repeated; and then he thought of a modest grave not far from the Hamlyn vault, and he sighed a little heavily. Perhaps in his old heart he thought that the time was fast coming when there would be no more marrying or giving in marriage, when worldly ambition and human pride should be as dust and nothingness.

It was at this moment, this golden moment, that Gerard took it into his head that he would jog his uncle's memory. Three days had passed, and he was beginning to think that it was time that he should have his answer; so he walked into the library in his leisurely fashion and plunged at once into business.

'I was thinking that we might as well finish our little talk,' he began pleasantly. 'I suppose you have made up your mind by this time, Uncle Godfrey?'

Sir Godfrey felt vaguely disturbed; he had read of transmission of thought and of occult agencies, and he felt there was something uncanny about this. Why should Gerard have put this question to him at the very moment that he had told himself that he must give way? He fidgeted and played with his pince-nez before he answered.

'I think it is about time that we were put out of our misery. You see, it is rather awkward for both of us—Doris especially—and I am bound to think of her.'

Then Sir Godfrey felt that he must be magnanimous; he must yield, but he would do it with dignity. He would abdicate with his regal garments still wrapped round him.

'I think it would have been better taste, Gerard, if you had waited until I had informed you of my decision. Your impatience is unseemly—unseemly; but one must not expect too much consideration from young people now.'

'I think I have an excuse for my impatience, Uncle Godfrey.'

Gerard spoke quite naturally, but no amount of eloquence

could have served him so well as that simple speech. Sir Godfrey's stiffness relaxed perceptibly.

'Of course—of course. One must make allowances for a man when he is in love, so we will waive that. I have been thinking very deeply, Gerard—the matter demanded weighty consideration; there were conditions that were not exactly palatable—but I have made up my mind to give up my own wishes for the sake of peace. It is a sacrifice—I will not deny that—a sacrifice I hardly expected to make at my age,' and Sir Godfrey looked very solemn; 'but if mischief comes of this concession, it will not be my fault.'

'Do you mean that you give in, Uncle Godfrey?—that Gerda may have her five thousand pounds and marry Lyall?'

Gerard spoke joyfully. Of course his uncle meant that.

'I will withdraw my opposition,' replied Sir Godfrey in his grand manner; 'and, as you and Doris wish it, Gerda shall have her money; but I must leave the rest in your hands. I suppose,' drawing himself up majestically, 'that you hardly expect me to make overtures to Dr. Lyall. It would certainly not be consistent with my dignity to do so.'

'You may leave it to me,' returned Gerard eagerly. 'Your dignity shall not suffer, Uncle Godfrey; I will take good care of that. The thing will right itself, somehow. I will have a run up to town myself one day, and see how the land lies. Aunt Clare will put me up to a thing or two, and between us we will think of something. You may just leave it to me; and thanks awfully!' finished Gerard, feeling as though he must rush off and tell Doris the good news.

But he was not to be let off so easily. Sir Godfrey felt that he was acting with surprising generosity, and that he deserved his reward. He did not intend his enjoyment to be curtailed in this off-hand fashion by Gerard's thoughtless impetuosity. The betrothal of his heir was an important event; it was not to be hidden in a corner, thrust out of sight.

To Gerard's secret disgust—for he had an Englishman's dislike of scenes—he was told to fetch Doris. Gerard had only time for a brief encouraging word before he ushered her into her grandfather's presence; where she had to listen to a long harangue, in which praises of his own magnanimity

and congratulations on her good fortune were mixed up with advice for her future conduct; to which Doris made no reply, but only looked at Gerard in an alarmed manner.

'You are frightening Doris, Uncle Godfrey,' he said, in response to this dumb appeal. 'You must not make her afraid. Things will come naturally to her by and by; but she is not my wife yet;' and Gerard looked at his young sweetheart very kindly.

'Are we engaged now?' whispered Doris when this ordeal was over, and they were safely outside the door. Sir Godfrey was preparing himself for another interview. He had rung his bell, and had desired that his daughter should come to him at once.

'Engaged? I should think so! So you need not keep me at a distance any longer. You have been awfully prim these three days, but you will not have your way any more, I can tell you!' And then he carried her off to his den to make a clearance of rubbish; but there was very little done, except in the way of talk, before the luncheon-bell rang.

This was a red-letter day to Sir Godfrey—a solemn and sacred day in the Hamlyn records. Rogers, the old butler, who had been in the family for thirty years, was informed of the event by his master, and two bottles of excellent wine were sent into the servants' hall, that the household should drink the health of the young couple. After dinner Sir Godfrey made another speech, during which Mrs. Meredith wept freely, and Gerard twirled his moustache, and wished at the bottom of his heart that he and Doris were safely out of it.

'Precious bad taste!' muttered Gerard to himself, as he glanced at Gerda's downcast face. All this ovation was a tacit reproach to her.

Two or three more days passed. The news had spread over the village like wildfire. Sir Godfrey had himself told the Rector and Captain Hake, and Mrs. Hake was beside herself with joy. Her pet Doris would one day be the mistress of the Hall.

The weather had suddenly changed. An unexpected thaw had set in, and the roads became now so passable that Gerard talked soon of running up to town, and there was

some idea of Doris accompanying him, and paying a short visit to her Aunt Clare.

One evening, after dinner, Gerard put on his ulster and went down to the village to give an order that had been forgotten, and Doris waited in the hall to let him in. Sultan had as usual accompanied his master. He was absent longer than she expected, and she opened the door the moment she heard his footsteps. He came in quickly, shutting out the damp, raw air, and followed her to the fire, forgetting to take off his ulster.

'I have heard a bad bit of news, Doey,' he said. 'Hake has met with an accident.'

'Oh, Gerard!'

'It is hard lines on the poor old man. He slipped on a bit of ice down by the grape-house, and fell so heavily that he broke his arm.'

'Broke his arm!'

'Yes, and poor Mrs. Hake is in an awful way. Of course, I called there for a moment to know the rights of it, as I only heard it from Stevenson. She was never a believer in Reynolds, and she has actually telegraphed up for Lyall.'

'You don't mean it? Oh, Gerard!'

'Of course it is ridiculous, but, then, it is her dear Lionel. When you have a Lionel of your own'—very severely—'you may be able to enter into her feelings. She owns Reynolds has set the arm very cleverly, but she will have it that Hake is feverish, and that there might be a complication. Of course I laughed at her, and that did her good; but, all the same, Lyall is coming. He has telegraphed to say that he will be at Darley at eight to-morrow morning.'

This was exciting, to say the least of it. Doris put her pink palms together and looked at Gerard.

'And now what are we to do about Gerda? Is she to know that he is expected?'

'Of course she must know'—indignantly.

'Are you sure of that? It will only fluster her, you see. I want to do what is best for her, but I cannot make up my mind.'

'Why, it is as simple as possible,' returned Doris, surprised at this sudden timidity and hesitation on Gerard's part. 'Of course we must tell her at once. It will make her happy

only to know that he is near. Do you think, if I had not seen you or heard of you for nearly six months, Gerard, that I should not like to know that you had suddenly arrived in Chesterton? It would be cruel, absolutely cruel, to hide it from Gerda. She might meet him suddenly, or someone from the village might tell her.' And this reasoning was so conclusive that in the end Gerard agreed with her.

Gerda took the news very quietly, probably because her inward agitation prevented much speech; but when Doris had left her she sat down by the fire and tried to realize it. He would be here—at Braeside—to-morrow morning; he was coming, really and truly. How many hours would he stay? Would there be any chance of their meeting? He could not come to the Hall, but perhaps Gerard would see him; he might drop some hint that her grandfather had changed his mind. But would that make any difference? He was still poor; he might be too proud to take her now she had five thousand pounds; he might still prefer to wait and work a little longer. If he would only call, if she could only see him just for ten minutes—she would not ask for more: just ten minutes—to see him and hear his voice!

Poor Gerda! Perhaps Gerard was right in his hesitation and reluctance to tell her. She could not sleep, could not quiet her whirling thoughts, could not repress that hungry yearning for a look, a word, a touch of the hand. It had grown to positive pain; it would not let her rest. It was almost morning before she fell into a fitful doze, and when she came down to breakfast, her languid step and heavy eyes made her mother and Doris glance anxiously at each other.

Gerard was in excellent spirits that morning; he talked a great deal, principally about the weather.

It was a regular thaw, he said; the roads were in a slushy, wretched condition, but it was easy to get about now. 'Anyone coming from Darley,' he continued, and here he went to the sideboard to cut himself some cold ham—'anyone coming from Darley would be able to get over the roads with tolerable comfort.'

Sir Godfrey pricked up his ears.

'Are you expecting anyone, Gerard?' he asked rather sharply.

'I was talking generally, Uncle Godfrey,' returned Gerard.

going on with his carving. 'Can I give anyone some ham? I am in a philanthropic mood this morning, and am thinking of the comforts of my fellow-creatures. If the frost had lasted, that Darley road would have been impassable.' And then he brought back his plate, and asked Doris what she was going to do with herself that morning.

When breakfast was over, Gerard went into the library, and remained there for some time; then he went to the stables, and looked up one or two of the tenants who wanted some repairs done; finally he strolled into the morning-room, and asked Mrs. Meredith if she had any message for Braeside.

'I am just going to look in there and see if I can be of any use,' he continued, addressing no one in particular. 'Hake has had a tolerable night, I hear, so I don't fancy there is much complication;' and then he walked off.

Gerda made no remark. She was wondering how she should get through the day, how she would bear this feverish strain that was on her. Work was irksome to her, but it was impossible to read. He was here now—he was close to her! The chimneys of Braeside could easily be seen from the Hall. The Hakes were their next neighbours.

Mrs. Meredith and Doris went on with their conversation. Now and then they glanced at the girl, but they wisely left her alone—women use a great deal of tact with each other—and Gerda, who was conscious of their watchfulness and forbearance, was grateful to them for allowing her the luxury of indulging her own thoughts without molestation.

An hour later a pencilled line from Gerard was brought to Doris, which she read out for the benefit of the others.

Gerard found he could be of use. Mrs. Hake was very glad to have him; she was obliged to remain with her husband, and, of course, Dr. Lyall was left alone. He had had his interview with his patient and his consultation with Dr. Reynolds, and had pronounced that Hake could not be in better hands. He was going to have luncheon there, and probably they would have a walk afterwards. Lyall would sleep at Braeside that night.

Gerda hardly knew how to sit through luncheon; she longed to get out in the air—exercise would have quieted her restlessness—but she dared not go outside the gates, and the sloppy garden-paths underneath the dripping branches

certainly offered no attractions. No, she could not go out. Gerard might think she was trying to meet them. It was impossible to guess in what direction they would walk. She must try to read—to do something. At least, she had the comfort of knowing that he would be still there that night.

The afternoon lagged on. In the twilight Mrs. Meredith indulged in a nap, and then Stephens brought in the lamps and began to arrange the little round tea-tables. Gerda moved listlessly to perform her usual duties, and then Doris's quick ears caught the sound of footsteps.

'There is Gerard!' she said, brightening in a moment; and she ran into the hall.

Contrary to their usual custom, they were sitting in the drawing-room; but Mrs. Meredith had declared the hall was cold, and that even the screen did not exclude the draughts, and she preferred the cosiness of her drawing-room.

Gerda's listless look changed into eager expectation. At least, Gerard would bring them news. She would hear his name mentioned, his words would be quoted; she would be told everything without stint or limit. Gerard was too kind and thoughtful not to understand all she felt. What a time he was! Doris was detaining him—questioning him as they were coming. Surely, there were other footsteps besides Gerard's! Could Grand have come out of his library? Could——

She stopped. It was Gerard certainly, but it was not Sir Godfrey who was following him. The keen flash of the eyes that met hers, and gave her a sudden giddy shock, was Dr. Lyall's.

Gerda stood still; she could not move. He was speaking to her mother, shaking hands with her, and then he came towards her with the quick, alert step she knew so well. Their hands met; he was looking at her with that curious intent look that was natural to him, as though he wanted to read her thoughts, but he did not say a word; only as he released her hand he half smiled.

Gerda needed no speech; she had her wish. What had become of her restlessness? She was at peace, utterly at peace. She felt as some sick child feels whose mother has been long absent from it and has now returned. She wanted nothing more—only this! only this!

'Shall I help you?' whispered Doris sympathetically.

But Gerda shook her head. She wanted no help; it was happiness enough to minister to him again.

'So Captain Hake is doing well——' began Mrs. Meredith, a little nervously; and then Sir Godfrey walked into the room and advanced with much dignity towards his guest.

'I am glad to see you, Dr. Lyall,' he said, with some solemnity in his tone; and then the two men shook hands

CHAPTER LI

DR. LYALL TURNS UP TRUMPS

> Was never payne, but it had joy at last
> In the fayre morrow.'
>
> STEPHEN HAWES.

GERDA felt as though she were in some blissful dream. Here was Alick standing on the rug, exchanging civil commonplaces with Sir Godfrey, and apparently as much at his ease as though he were an habitual visitor, while Sir Godfrey's manner was equally surprising to his grand-daughter.

Perhaps he was a little frigid in his politeness, and there was a trifle too much condescension in his carefully-worded inquiries after Dr. Lyall's well-being to be entirely palatable to the younger man; but he had the good sense to perceive the effort the old man was making, and his answers were duly grateful.

Gerda was quite shut out from that little fireside circle that closed round Dr. Lyall, though Doris still hovered about her as though solicitous of again offering help; but Gerda did not notice her. She mechanically filled the cups that were brought to her, and seemed occupied only with her tea-table; but not a tone or word spoken by Alick escaped her. That quiet voice vibrated through her like music. It was perfect happiness only to hear it.

Perhaps Dr. Lyall was content to bide his time, for he made no attempt to speak to her, though no movement or look escaped his notice. Once he brought his cup to be replenished, and stood beside her a moment.

'You have not forgotten the two lumps of sugar,' was his sole observation, as he took it from her hand.

But he did not linger, or ask her how she was. Probably that question would have been unnecessary. His practised eye had already noted the change those six months had effected. She was thinner, paler, more unsubstantial-looking than ever; but never had any face seemed so lovely to him.

'My nephew tells me that you will do us the pleasure of dining with us, Dr. Lyall,' observed Sir Godfrey graciously.

'Mr. Hamlyn was good enough to ask me, Sir Godfrey, and, as there is nothing more that I can do for my patient, I think my absence will be a relief to Mrs. Hake.'

But Gerda was not allowed to hear any more, for Gerard was speaking in her ear.

'Let Doris take your place; I want you alone a moment. No one is looking,' he continued impatiently, as she hesitated; 'just slip away with me.'

And Gerard's manner was so peremptory that Gerda was obliged to obey him. But she rose reluctantly; it was cruel to take her away out of sound of that voice. But Gerard knew what he was about. He walked into the deserted hall, which always looked its best at this hour, with its blazing fire and soft lamplight illumining its cosy circle of oak settees and easy-chairs, while only the farthest recesses of the hall were in shadow. Gerda looked at him appealingly, but Gerard did not wait to be questioned.

'There, I think I have managed that very cleverly! You will be all right here for a few minutes. Lyall begged me to get him an opportunity of speaking to you. Now I will go back and ask him to have a smoke. You may depend upon it, Uncle Godfrey will be glad to get rid of him. He looks bored already;' and without looking at his cousin, or asking her permission, Gerard coolly turned on his heel and marched off to the drawing-room.

Gerda felt strangely nervous when she was left alone. After all, the meeting would not be without awkwardness. What would he say to her? Would he speak to her as a friend, or—— But Gerda had no time to pursue this embarrassing train of thought. The drawing-room door opened. She could hear Gerard's voice and laugh—'Au revoir!' it said lightly; and then Dr. Lyall came quickly round the

screen. She was still standing, but she raised her eyes and looked at him a little timidly; and then—no, she had not expected this, that he would take her in his arms and hold her closely to him.

'This makes up for everything, my darling—my darling!'

'Oh, Alick, what does it mean?'

'Sit down, and I will tell you all about it. No, not just now. I want to look at you first. Gerda, you have not kept your promise to me. You have not taken care of yourself.'

'Indeed, indeed, I have!'

But her colour rose beneath that grave, questioning glance. Then Dr. Lyall sighed.

'It has been too hard for both of us, but it is over now. I would not willingly live through those six months again. They were the longest six months I ever had in my life. Gerda, if you only knew how I have hungered and thirsted to see you!' She was silent. Perhaps she felt that she had hungered and thirsted, too. 'It was terribly hard at times, but I had my work. When I look at you now, and see that you, too, have suffered, I begin to wonder if I did rightly. My dearest, tell me, for my peace of mind, that you have not thought me unkind?'

'Oh, Alick, how can you ask such a question?'

'I am afraid Alick means to ask a good many troublesome questions; but I am answered sufficiently. Gerda, that cousin of yours is the best fellow I ever met. It is all his doing that I am here to-night.'

'You must tell me about everything. I cannot understand it. It is all so sudden and so strange.'

'Yes, I am afraid I startled you; but it could not be helped. How was I to resist the temptation of seeing you? And, then, Hamlyn assured me that he had made it all right with Sir Godfrey.'

'Did Gerard tell you that?'

'Not at first—not for a long time; but we were walking together, and somehow we got friendly and confidential, and I suppose I let him see that I was troubled about things. I forget what I said, but he turned to me abruptly, and replied that, if I were still in the same mind, he was glad to tell me that his uncle had come to his senses, and that I

might go in and win, or words to that effect. Anyhow, he made me understand that the way was clear for me.'

'Did he tell you that it was all his doing?'

'Well, he implied that some sort of pressure had been put on Sir Godfrey; but he was not very communicative on that point. He told me of his engagement with your sister, and I confess that I was so surprised that I could hardly find words to congratulate him.'

'Doris exactly suits him. They are very happy,' returned Gerda, somewhat embarrassed by the look that accompanied his speech. 'I always hoped it would come to this. And, then, they were so much together.'

'Yes; propinquity and sympathy have a good deal to do in such cases; but, all the same, I was extremely surprised, and I am afraid Hamlyn saw it, for he coloured up, and changed the subject rather quickly.'

'Doris will make him just the wife he needs.'

'I do not doubt it for a moment. Gerda, he told me something else. I had no idea that I was going to marry a rich woman.'

'Alick, how can you talk so? Just five thousand pounds!'

'Five thousand pounds seem riches to me. Do you realise what this means? Your grandfather's generosity—for it is generosity, under the circumstances—has smoothed the way for our marriage. You will have the comforts now that I could not afford to give you. You know, dear, that I am still a poor man.'

'You know my opinion on that point, Alick,' rather reproachfully.

'Yes, darling, and I know your unselfishness. You would have married me six months ago if I had asked you, and would not have counted the cost. You have never been afraid of my poverty.'

'Certainly I am not afraid.'

Then he drew her towards him with a mute caress, and in that silence, so full of eloquence, both of them felt that that moment repaid them for those weary months of separation.

'Shall I give you back this?' touching his watch-chain presently. Then for the first time tears came to Gerda's eyes.

'I have missed it so,' she whispered, as he slipped the ring into its place. How the sapphires and diamonds shone in the firelight! But Dr. Lyall hardly heard the whisper; he was looking at the thin little hand rather sadly.

'Gerda,' he said suddenly, 'I shall take you away as soon as possible. I want to have you under my own care. I know I could make you as strong as possible. There is nothing really wrong with you, only it is natural that I should be anxious.'

'But there is no need for anxiety; I shall be quite well now. Alick, I have not asked you about Hester. I am longing to hear about her.' Then he roused himself from his abstraction.

'Hester is quite well, and her school is flourishing, and she works harder than ever. I am glad to say Julius is working too. I have some hopes of him now.'

'Has he got over Ray's death?'

'Well, I will not say that; but he is less unreasonable in his grief. He frets a good deal after her at times. He has just painted a picture of her, and that has occupied his thoughts. When he earns any money he brings it to Hester; he tells her that he dare not trust himself to spend money now.'

'Hester must be much happier.'

'She will be happier when she knows things have come right between us; for our separation has preyed upon her mind. I do not see them as often as I should wish, because the sight of me seems to oppress her. Hester is terribly sensitive.'

'I found that out long ago. Tell me now about Pamela.' Then he smiled very brightly.

'Oh, I have good news there, unless Mrs. Glyn has forestalled me; but no, it was only settled the day before yesterday. She and Derrick are to be married at Easter.'

'At Easter?'

'Yes, Derrick has got on at last, and he thinks they have waited long enough. Happiness improves Pamela; she is as sweet as honey now. I forgot to tell Hamlyn that when we were discussing future plans. It seems he and your sister intend to be married in June.'

'That was Grand's idea; he is so anxious to see Gerard settled.'

'I do not see why we should not follow such an excellent example. I must sound Sir Godfrey on that point before I leave. Gerda, tell me this truly: would this suit you, or would you rather wait a little?' And Alick looked at her rather anxiously.

'I would rather do what you think best.'

'Then it shall be June!'—joyfully. 'I will get Hamlyn on our side. My darling, if you only knew how grateful I am to you! but when I look at the home of which I am depriving you, and think how little I have to offer you——'

But she would not let him finish.

'It is Gerard's and Doris's home; it is not mine. Alick, you must not be so faithless. The home you make for me will be far dearer to me than this.' And Gerda so evidently meant what she said that Alick believed her; and, after all, they would not always be poor. If Julius worked—but he would leave all that; at least, if he died his wife would not be penniless. He would no longer hesitate; his happiness was in his grasp, and he would dare to take it.

The dressing-bell warned them of the length of their interview, and the next moment Doris's smiling face appeared from behind the screen.

'Oh, come here, Dorrie!' exclaimed her sister. 'I want you and Alick to know each other better.'

'Is it all settled?' asked Doris, a little breathlessly. 'Are you really going to be my brother, Dr. Lyall?'

'You must call him Alick now, Doris. Mother always does.'

'Oh, mother saw so much of him at Cromehurst; but I will do anything to please you and him. I was not always on your side,' continued Doris, looking at Dr. Lyall rather penitently. 'I told mother that I did not think you half good enough for Gerda, but I have changed my mind now.'

'I am glad to hear that,' was his amused answer. And then the sisters left him, and Dalton came in to say that the bachelor's room was prepared for him.

Dr. Lyall felt a curious revulsion as he entered the room; it was the one he had occupied for a few hours on his first visit to Chesterton Hall.

The whole scene rose up before his mind—the park, with its bare black trees, and the sheet of gray ice lying below the wooded banks. Again he heard the crackling of the treacherous ice and felt the deadly chill of the water. He could feel the heavy weight on his arm, and see the long fair hair streaming over his shoulder.

Yes, he had saved her life, and this was his reward, that she had become his dearest blessing! The bright intelligence, the pure girlish heart, were his. She had come to him out of the jaws of death to be the living sunshine of his home.

After all, he thought, what were poverty or wealth, or sickness or health, or any other adjunct of our human existence, compared to this sacred and mysterious union of two hearts that constitutes the true marriage; and in that exalted mood that comes to every right-minded man at such times, he told himself that he would prove worthy of her guileless trust. 'As far as a man can play Providence, I will strive to shield her,' he said to himself; and in after-life Dr. Lyall nobly redeemed this promise.

Dinner that night was a somewhat solemn affair. Sir Godfrey was not perfectly at his ease, and his strained politeness and efforts to be sprightly made the conversation a little flat; and it was felt to be a relief when the ladies adjourned to the drawing-room.

Dr. Lyall and Gerard soon followed them, and the former had a brief low-toned conversation with Mrs. Meredith, which, to judge from Alick's face, was perfectly satisfactory.

When Sir Godfrey fell into his usual doze, the four young people went out into the hall. Gerard and Doris ensconced themselves by the fire, but Gerda and Alick wandered to the oriel window to admire the moonlight that was flooding the old hall with light.

'What a glorious evening!' observed Gerda. 'Look, Alick, that pathway seems as though it were paved with silver.' But Alick was looking at her; with her white dress, and her fair hair, and that soft, radiant smile, she looked to him the embodiment of youth and purity, like some white angel strayed down to earth. But he forbore to tell her so; her very unconsciousness made him hold his peace.

'Gerard,' whispered Doris, 'I am sure I shall like my new brother-in-law. I had no idea he was so nice.'

But Gerard did not answer. He was leaning forward and pulling Sultan's ear gently, and there was a thoughtful look on his face.

'Did you hear me, Gerard?'—rather louder; and Doris felt a little pang at his inattention. Something was troubling him. He was frowning at the fire, and, worst of all, he had not heard her.

'I beg your pardon;' and Gerard roused himself. 'Were you speaking, Doey? I was deep in thought at that moment. I was thinking what a fool I have been.'

'Oh, Gerard!'

'An awful fool! How could I have imagined that Gerda and I could ever have suited each other? It was the very madness of folly. But I am wiser now. I would not change my sweetheart for any other woman in the world. You suit me down to the ground, Doey, and that is the truth.' And, as Doris nestled closer to him in the flickering firelight, a tiny tear splashed upon his hands.

'You have made me so happy, dear!' as he looked somewhat alarmed at this. 'I cannot help crying out of sheer happiness. I did so want you to be satisfied.'

'No one else would satisfy me,' was his brief response.

And then they began to talk quietly of Sir Godfrey's wish that they should be married in June—for he had already settled this, to Mrs. Meredith's regret. But as Sir Godfrey would hear of no delay, and Gerard was of the same mind, Honoria was obliged to submit.

After all, it was the most sensible plan, as Gerard carefully pointed out to her. He and Doris would enjoy their holiday among Swiss mountains and Alpine lakes while the Ladies' Gallery was being prepared for young Mrs. Hamlyn. It would please and amuse Sir Godfrey to superintend the workmen; it would give scope to his love of management and arrangement.

'We will have a good time while we are about it,' went on Gerard. 'There is no need to hurry back. Uncle Godfrey could do without us until September. I must be back for the shooting, you know.'

And of course Doris agreed to this. She was willing to

wander over the globe if Gerard wished it. Wherever Gerard was would be her paradise. But the thought of that home-coming in September, and the glories of the Ladies' Gallery, was delicious too.

Meanwhile Dr. Lyall was saying:

'I must say good-night, as I have to see my patient again before he goes to sleep. I shall be here in the morning, and I can talk to Sir Godfrey; but I must go up to town by the 2.50 train.'

'But I shall see you soon again?'

'I hope so, though I must not promise. I am a busy man, as you know, and it is not easy for a doctor to get leave of absence.'

'If Doris goes to town to get her things, she will stay with Aunt Clare, and perhaps I may come too. Shall you like that, Alick?'

She need hardly have asked the question when she saw his start and pleased look.

'I never thought of that. And you will have to get your own things, too. Gerda, you must time your visit so that you may be present at Pamela's wedding. I must have you near me on that day. Now I must go, dearest. We will not disturb the others; they look far too much absorbed in their talk. You must bid them good-night for me.'

'May I let you out?'

'Certainly not. Do you think I will let you breathe that damp night air? I shall have to be very strict with you, I see.'

And Gerda retired smiling to the window. The door opened and closed, and she stood there still watching him. Half-way down the path he paused and looked back. The red gleam of the firelight was behind her, but he could see her distinctly as she stood there in her white gown with the smile still on her face. The moonbeams were all about her; they were about him, too; and as he walked in their brightness he told himself that the loneliness of his life was over, and that henceforth they would walk together hand-in-hand through the sunshine and through the shadows, until the journey of life was past.

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